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HOWARD WALDROP
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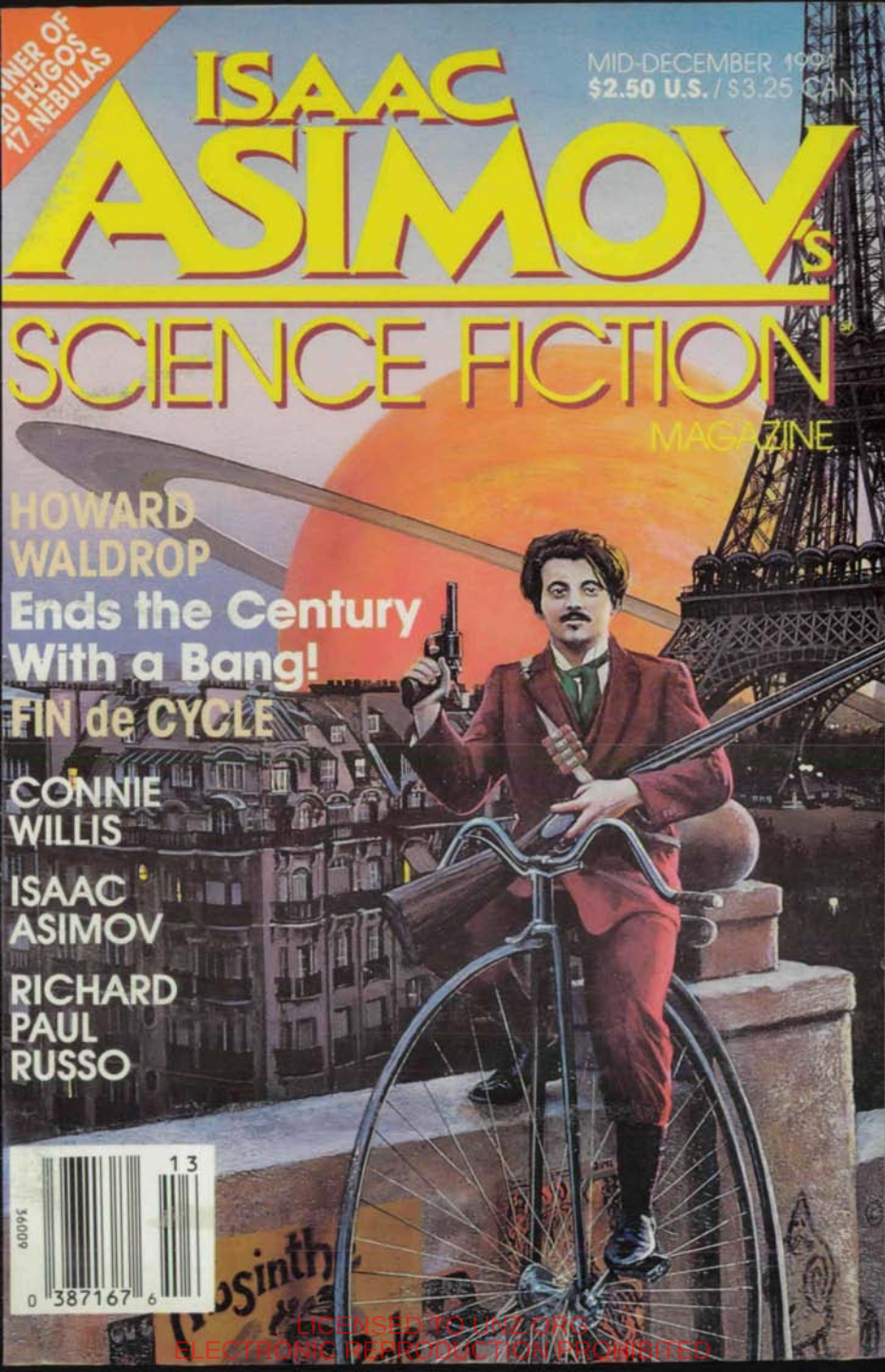
ISAAC ASIMOV

RICHARD PAUL RUSSO



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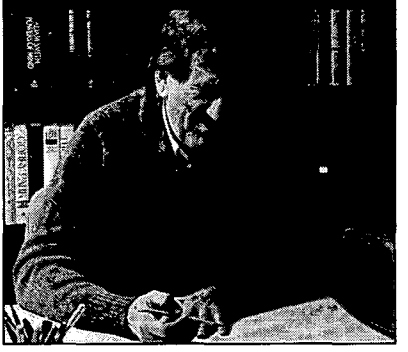

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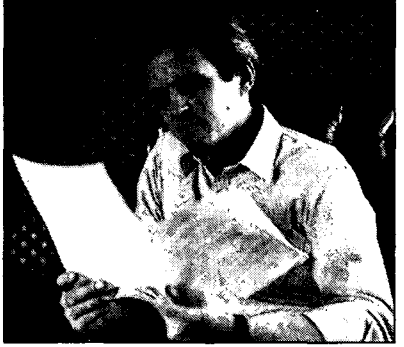

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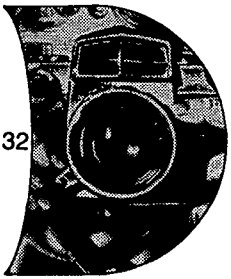

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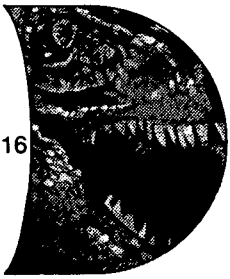

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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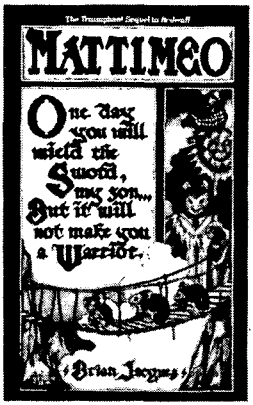
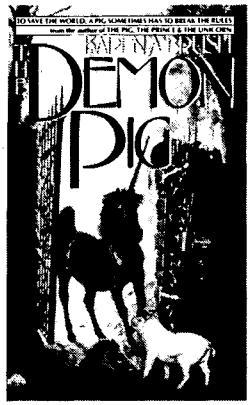

The Triumphant Sequel to Redwall
MATTIMEO
One day you will wield the Sword, my son... But it will not make you a Warrior.
Brian Jacques


TO SAVE THE WORLD, A PIG SOMETIMES HAS TO BREAK THE RULES
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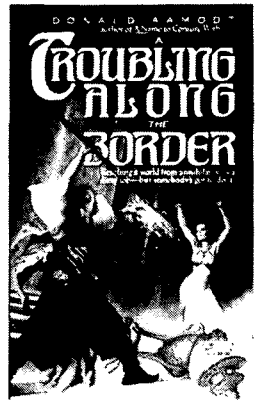
DEMON PIG



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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ALIENS

Back during World War II, the United States was very worried about foreigners, having consideration for possible espionage. (Worries about terrorism were not prevalent in those halcyon days.) For this reason, foreigners were supposed to register, and to report at the beginning of every year, so that a record of their names and addresses would be had. They were referred to as "aliens."

In fact, Bob Hope had a tagline which went, "Where does an alien go to register?" whenever something happened that was beyond his understanding.

And what did we call life-forms from other worlds? Why, we called them "extraterrestrials." However, as science fiction grew more popular, especially on television, trouble arose over the word "extraterrestrial." It had six syllables and was a little above the understanding of the average American. For that reason, I think, life-forms from other worlds are now uniformly called "aliens." It's part of the natural dumb-down process that so many Americans seem to demand. But I'll call them aliens, too.

In general, the use of aliens in science fiction does not usually show the writer's imagination at its best. The monsters in Greek myths are, I suppose, an early equivalent of aliens, but usually they are composed of ordinary creatures stitched together. The chimera was part goat, part lion, and part eagle. The gorgon was part woman, part snakes. The sphinx was part woman and part lion. Centaurs were part men and part horses and so on. The best monsters were Scylla, who was the equivalent of a giant octopus, and the cyclops, who were giants with one eye.

It took a long time before even these things were matched. The first description of aliens in modern times that I know of (I'm not a science fiction encyclopedist so I can be corrected) is in Voltaire's "Micromegas," where he has an alien from Saturn and one from Sirius, commenting on the human condition. They differ from human beings only in being of monstrous size. But then, Voltaire was not really interested in aliens; he was just utilizing them to satirize human society.

Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver's*

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Travels, had the equivalent of aliens in three parts of the story. There were the Lilliputians, the Brobdingnagians and the Houynhnhms. But they were just tiny men, giant men, and intelligent horses. Again, Swift was not interested in the aliens as such but used them merely to satirize human society.

For real aliens, we have to pass on to H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* in which the Martians, as described, are nothing at all like human beings in appearance and behavior, and are terribly frightening in consequence. That, however, was H. G. Wells.

Most science fiction writers who followed Wells, and who were pygmies in comparison, showed almost no imagination at all in describing aliens. I believe that Edgar Rice Burroughs described Martians so like Earthmen (except for their color) that the hero could mate with a Martian princess. In general, this sort of thing went on with aliens (almost always intelligent extraterrestrials) differing from human beings in trivial ways — very high foreheads, little wizened dwarflike stature, antennae, green skins, and so on.

After Wells, the next example of good handling of aliens came with Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey," in which there was an intelligent ostrichlike creature who was clearly sentient but who was hard to understand, because it followed John W. Campbell's request: "Show me an alien creature

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who is as intelligent as a human being, but whose intelligence is not like that of a human being."

Naturally, I myself have had plenty of trouble with the depiction of aliens. To a great extent I cheated, for in my Foundation novels, and in almost all my novels, I deal with an all-human universe and there are no aliens. (It's hard enough to describe different human societies and different human ways of thinking.)

In my story "Nightfall," in which I deal with a planet that is not Earth and is nothing at all like Earth, I calmly pretend that the intelligent inhabitants are exactly like Earthmen in appearance and in behavior. This is because the alien details of those intelligent beings are of no importance to the story. It is only the astronomical situation that is.

On the other hand, in the second part of my novel *The Gods Themselves* I do introduce aliens, partly because I grew tired of hearing people say that I left them out because I couldn't imagine them. They were quite wrong. My aliens were different in every possible way from human beings, even down to their sex lives. What's more, I avoided unnecessary complications that would detract from the story by describing the aliens (three varieties) without going into too-great details. That made it possible for the readers to imagine them, within certain limits, as they wished.

Of course, the trouble with science fiction these days is that it has hit the movies and television in a big way. Mind you, it is not quality science fiction, for the most part, that has reached it. Quality remains almost entirely the province of the printed media—magazines and books. However, there is not much of a market for quality science fiction as compared with the kind of stuff we see in the visual media.

I don't wish to make a blanket condemnation. I enjoyed the "Star Wars" trilogy, and a number of other movies, and "Star Trek" made amazing attempts to be intelligent, while its successor "Star Trek: The Next Generation" is even better.

However, these are exceptional, and even the best of the science fiction on the visual media are hampered as far as the representation of aliens is concerned, since there is so often the necessity of having a human actor inside all the make-up. The result is that aliens may clearly be a different species of being from Homo sapiens but one glance will show that almost all of them are at least primates.

One television program that purported to be science fiction was so horrible that it amused me. In it, the Moon was somehow driven away from the Earth and set to wandering through space. Now if this really happened, the Moon would move away in all likelihood at a couple of miles per second (the escape velocity from Earth at the Moon's distance is in the neighborhood of a mile per second) and if it travels like that it will take it well over a hundred years to drift be-

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yond the orbit of Pluto. That will be so if it travels in a straight line, but it won't. It will travel in a curved orbit that will probably keep it within the solar system forever.

However, in the television program it swoops into interstellar space at once.

And how long will it take to reach another star? Well, if it is aimed directly at Alpha Centauri and is traveling at a speed of 2000 miles per second, which has a likelihood at zero, it would take, I think, about 4000 years to reach it. If it is aiming in just any direction, it would easily drift a million years without coming very close to any star.

Then, if you figure that it would be generous to suppose that one star out of a thousand would have a planet with intelligent aliens aboard, you can see that it might easily take a billion years before you encountered one.

On the program, however, a new planet, with a load of intelligent aliens on board, was encountered each week. Every one of the aliens looked a great deal like human beings. The people responsible for the show clearly knew nothing at all about that portion of the universe outside the city limits of Los Angeles.

In the second season of the program, an attempt was made to improve the quality of the show. In order to demonstrate their success at this, they invited Ben Bova, then editor of *Analog*, to attend a viewing of the first episode. I presume they felt he would give them a boost in the magazine. After the program showing, there was to be a lunch to which Ben was also invited.

Ben asked me if I wanted to come along. Well, I wasn't interested in the program but I was very fond of Ben, and besides in those days I was very fond of lunch, too. So I agreed to accompany him.

We sat in the little projection room and watched the first program of the new season.

You'll have to take my word for it, people, it was incredibly wretched. I kept a poker face all the way through. After all, I had not been directly invited and it was not my place to say anything. I just kept my eye on Ben and he was stony-faced, too.

After it was over, Ben said something very noncommittal and I said nothing at all. Then they said, "Come to lunch with us."

Ben said, "I'm afraid I can't. Something has turned up and I'm afraid I must leave." He motioned to me, and left.

I followed him and after we had walked several blocks very rapidly, I said, "Where are we going, Ben?"

And he said, "As far away as possible, Isaac." ●

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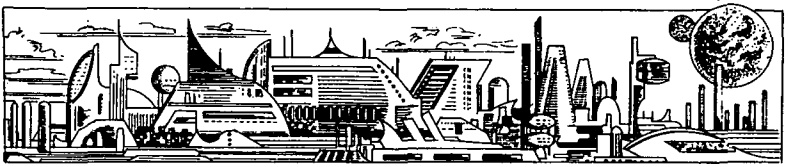

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

This letter is in regards to your May editorial, regarding your apparent skepticism as to the existence of a "National Academic Decathlon." I would like to say that there is such an organization, and that *The Martian Way* was one of the reading materials in a recent Decathlon.

The Decathlon is a high school competition in which teams from schools all across the nation compete in ten tests on ten subjects, hence the name "Deca"thlon.

I would not have found it necessary to write this letter if it were not for the fact that you made a point of making the Decathlon seem like some shady quasi-organization. Not that I am angered or anything like that; I am just trying to keep a fellow human informed. Sincerely,

Richard Cox
Placentia, CA

I am delighted to know this. I'm afraid that I've grown cynical with the years and I'm constantly afraid that some joking reader is pulling my leg. However, a National Academic Decathlon sounds like a good idea and if they want to include The Martian Way *as part of it, more power to them.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I found your May '91 editoral interesting, particularly your remarks about the mother who wrote to you when you refused to write a bogus recommendation for her son. This kind of lack of ethics seems to be pervading society today. I've seen so many parents teaching their children by example—cut in line at the theater, steal a glass from a restaurant, neglect to tell a clerk if he's forgotten to charge for something. When the kid grows up and steals a car will the parents realize that he's just following their example? Will the parents think it's all right? Well, only if it's a compact car!

Margie Crider
Scottsdale, AZ

Alas, we live in troubled and corrupt times.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

One reason I subscribed to this magazine is because it has your name on it, complete with a possessive " 's". I assumed that this meant that this magazine is in some way made in your literary image, that you exert some editorial influence. Then I read the editorial that you wrote in the May

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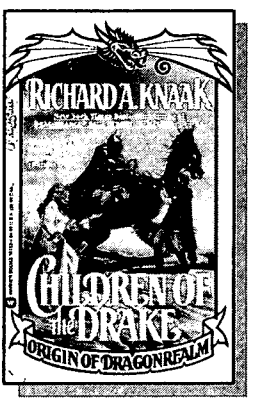

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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

December is dragon month here at Questar. CHILDREN OF THE DRAKE is perfect for the martial dragon fan while DRAGON'S QUEEN is designed for the more genteel vegetarian dragon set, cutesy and proper. One prefers war, the other peace. One likes meat, the other candy.

It would appear that even dragons can be broken down into hawks and doves.

Not wishing to drag-on unnecessarily, let me just finish by saying that for anytime of the year dragons are the perfect holiday beastie.

...and when you see me around, be sure to ask me about half-pint heroes, and I will regale you with tales to the wee hours of the morning.

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The author of *Dragon's Knight* now continues her delightful dragon series with DRAGON'S QUEEN.

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'91 issue, in which you deny all editorial responsibility, so I looked at the list of people responsible for the magazine on page five. Sure enough, your name only appears as "Editorial Director." I assume that means that you write the editorials and perhaps answer letters, but the true shaper of this magazine's content is the editor, Gardner Dozois. This being the case, if anybody's name is on the cover of this magazine, shouldn't it be his?

David Rubin
57 Floyd Street
Staten Island, NY 10310

There's a very simple reason for not putting Gardner's name on the cover. The magazine would then not sell as well as if my own humble name were there. Joel Davis, our publisher, knows exactly how to make money, and he wants my name on the book and no one else's. I assure you I would be perfectly willing to abandon the responsibility to someone else, if I were allowed to.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I suspect this will be a long letter, and apologize for that. I know that you are a busy man, but I do have a purpose here. Yesterday, I recieved your May 1991 issue. I have yet to read any of the stories, but I did read your editorial. I found one phrase in it especially chilling: "As my time on earth grows shorter . . . " I don't much like that phrase. In fact, I don't like it at all, and it put me in mind of something I want to do.

I am now thirty years old. I have been reading your stories since I was fourteen, and yours is the first science fiction I ever read (let's not count the Mushroom Planet books, please). Over the years, I have had enormous joy from reading your tales, and the thought of your death leaves a hollow place within me. I know that you did not write for *me,* but for all your readers, and perhaps for the joy of telling stories. Still, I would like to thank you, and *not* by sending flowers after you are gone. I would much rather give you a bouquet now, while you might enjoy it. So you have my thanks, and the following story, which is true.

Four years ago, two of my former students and their mother invited me to dinner; we were no more than casual acquaintances. We stopped at the library so their mother might pick up a book. The boys, Jason and Robert (both eleven), had complained of boredom during foul weather. They struck me as bright, so I hauled them over to the "A" shelf and pushed the Foundation Trilogy and *I, Robot* into their hands, with the promise that, if they read them, they would find it time well spent.

Their mother told me that the excitement around their home during the next week was something she had never seen before, as the twins discovered the magic that comes only with a good storyteller. I found myself drafted on a regular basis after that, for trips to the library or mall in search of the next "right" book (I had emphasized the importance of reading them in the "right" order, so as to preserve the suprise I knew came toward the

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end, when you started tying so many of your different works together).

I had the good fortune of being a guest in their home the day Jason learned who Hummin is, in *Prelude to Foundation*. His response was succinct, and typically eleven; he got a shocked look on his face, inhaled sharply, dropped the book as he jumped from his chair, and shouted, "Yes! Yes!"

Robert's response to this was even more delicious: "Shut up! Shut up and DON'T SAY ANYTHING! Just finish it, and GIVE ME THAT BOOK!" To which Jason, with a very innocent look, replied, "Oh, I won't be finished for *hours* yet. But let me tell you what happens . . . " I won't describe what occurred next. Just picture it, and enjoy the scene.

I now have a strong friendship with this family, one which I find sustaining in times of trouble. Much of this is due to "credit" I built in the boys' eyes, just by having been the one to recommend an author whose work they would treasure. They have gone on to become voracious readers, not just of science fiction, but the various classics of general literature as well. I think much of the credit for this goes to the positive experience they had with your work. Jason has expressed an interest in writing; I suspect he may make a fine storyteller someday. Even if not, you have helped to enrich the lives and shape the personalities of two people who have become very important to me, and I thank you for that as well.

As I said before, I don't like the thought of you dying, and there being no more new Asimov stories to enjoy. I hope that you will keep writing as long as possible, and that you know just how important what you do and have done is, not just to me, but to so many people throughout the world. I suspect this is becoming just a bit sycophantic, and I didn't mean it to. But I did want to say thank you, and hope that I might in some way be able to give you some small measure of pleasure, in the way you have given it to me and to others. Better a bouquet while you live . . .

May you find much joy and continued success in your career, and may your muse treat you kindly. Please keep writing.

Most Sincerely,

Robert M. Dye
Hales Corner, WI

I assure you that I will stay alive as long as I can and that I will write to the bitter end. I am delighted that your friends fell in love with the FOUNDATION but I have long noted that I am an addictive phenomenon. People who read one of my books chase out for another one at once. I don't object; it helps me emotionally and financially.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

This from a very pleased reader. Although I am just an ordinary reader of your magazine and much of your science fiction, I still would like to ask for your help. I could have written many pages to praise you and your wonderful works, but it is enough to say that to truly enjoy your stories was one of the

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most important reasons for me to master the English language quickly. Now I am an assistant editor in the Chemical Abstracts Service.

Since I love languages and speak several of them, I would like to know in how many languages your books have been published. Moreover, if possible, please tell me how I can buy the translated works (such as the Foundation series and robot series), especially the paperback editions.

I am particularly interested in the Japanese, Korean, French, and German editions, if they exist. If you do not have this information and are not able to direct me to other possible sources of information, I will keep looking. Even if you are too busy to read my letter, I will understand and remain a loyal fan of yours.

Thank you. I expect to enjoy *IAsfm* for many years to come.

Zhiyong Shen
Columbus, OH

My books have been published in about forty foreign languages. Almost all of them have gone into Japanese, German and French. I'm not sure about Korean. As to how to get hold of them, that I don't know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have just read your May 1991 editorial in which you justly blast several young adults for both unethical requests (demands) and for confusing rights with special privileges.

While I agree with you wholeheartedly, as a young adult of twenty-three I am concerned with the image you (and others) might have of my generation. I have been working since the age of twelve, have just graduated from an accredited university, and feel myself to be a responsible citizen. I do not believe I am atypical of my generation.

With all of the problems my generation have inherited (to name a few: over a three trillion dollar public debt, a public school system that promotes mediocrity, a Congress with an incumbency rate similar to the British House of Lords) all of us need to seek constructive solutions to the problems of today and tomorrow. (That's one of the reasons I read *IAsfm*.) Might I suggest that the next time you are exposed to one of these parasites, you give them some constructive advice, such as recommending that they read something by Keith Laumer. Since all of his works revolve around personal responsibility, perhaps some of these bad apples might pick up an ideal or two and rejoin humanity.

On a lighter note: If con is the opposite of pro, what is the opposite of progress?

I am looking forward to seeing your shows on the Sci-Fi Channel. Would you comment on what these shows will be?

Lance Gentry
Orlando, FL

I agree with you that the younger generation is inheriting a world that is unbearable. As for the shows on the Sci-Fi Channel, I am sorry to say that I don't know what they will be.

—Isaac Asimov

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IASFM 15TH ANNIVERSARY SURVEY

In 1992, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary. To commemorate this special occasion in science fiction publishing, we are considering producing a number of special items and making them available to our loyal readers.

We need your help to ensure that we produce merchandise that you will find appealing. Following is a list of suggested items. Please rank these items in the order of their interest to you. (Number 1 reflecting the greatest degree of interest.)

_____T-shirt featuring *IAsfm* anniversary art
_____Sweatshirt featuring *IAsfm* anniversary art
_____Lapel or tie pin
_____Coffee mug
_____Novelty wristwatch (around $19.95)
_____Luxury wristwatch (around $39.95)
_____Necktie
_____*IAsfm* baseball cap
_____Posters or prints
_____Tote bag
_____Audio cassette, featuring Isaac Asimov

Do you have any suggestions for items that Davis Publications might produce to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine?* Please write your suggestions below.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Please send your response to:

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Thank you for your help.

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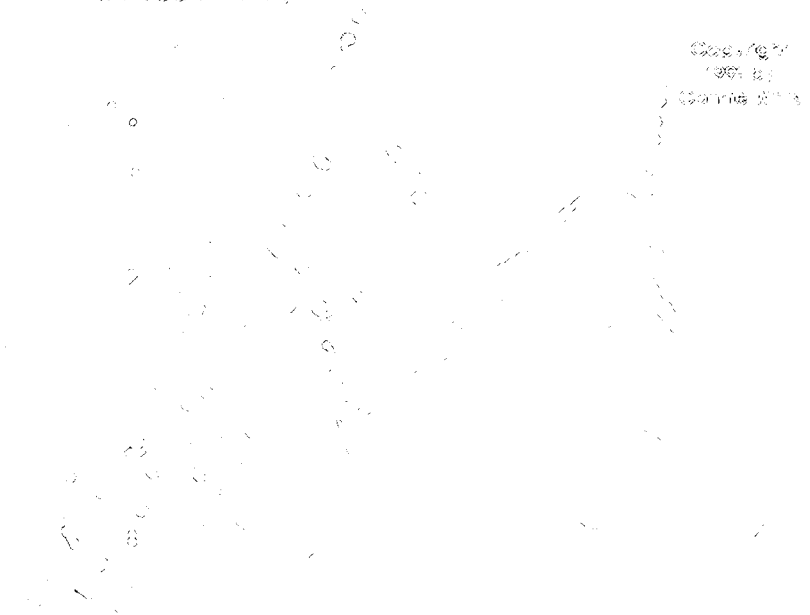
[illegible] ORGIASTIC

by Connie [illegible]

In one of her highly acclaimed comedic works, this author-time Nebula award winner delves into the most outrageous of all prehistoric landscapes, the college campus!

[illegible]



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"It was in the Late Cretaceous that predators reached their full flowering," Dr. Othniel said. "Of course, carnivorous dinosaurs were present from the Middle Triassic on, but it was in the Late Cretaceous, with the arrival of the albertosaurus, the velociraptor, the deinonychus, and of course, the tyrannosaurus rex, that the predatory dinosaur reached its full strength, speed, and sophistication."

Dr. Othniel wrote, "LATE CRETACEOUS—PREDATORS" on the board. He suffered from arthritis and a tendency to stoop, and the combination made him write only on the lower third of the chalkboard. He wrote, "ALBERTOSAURUS, COELOPHYSIS, VELOCIRAPTOR, DEINONYCHUS, TYRANNOSAURUS REX," in a column under "LATE CRETACEOUS—PREDATORS," which put "TYRANNOSAURUS REX" just above the chalk tray.

"Of all these," Dr. Othniel said, "tyrannosaurus rex is the most famous, and deservedly so."

Dr. Othniel's students wrote in their notebooks, "#1 LC. predator TRX" or "No predators in the Late Cretaceous" or "I have a new roommate. Her name is Traci. Signed, Deanna." One of them composed a lengthy letter protesting the unfairness of his parking tickets.

"This flowering of the predators was partly due to the unprecedented abundance of prey. Herbivores such as the triceratops, the chasmosaurus, and the duck-billed hadrosaur roamed the continents in enormous herds."

He had to move an eraser so he could write "PREY—HADROSAURS" under "TYRANNOSAURUS REX." His students wrote, "Pray—duck-billed platypus," and "My new roommate Traci has an absolutely WOW boyfriend named Todd," and "If you think I'm going to pay this ticket, you're crazy!"

"The hadrosaurs were easy prey. They had no horns or bony frills like the triceratops," Dr. Othniel said. "They did, however, have large bony crests which may have been used to trumpet warnings to each other or to hear or smell the presence of predators." He squeezed "HOLLOW BONY CREST" in under "HADROSAURS" and raised his head, as if he had heard something.

One of his sophomores, who was writing "I don't even have a car," glanced toward the door, but there wasn't anyone there.

Dr. Othniel straightened, vertebra by vertebra, until the top of his bald head was nearly even with the top of the blackboard. He lifted his chin, as if he were sniffing the air, and then bent over again, frowning. "Warnings, however, were not enough against the fifty-foot tall tyrannosaurus rex, with his five-foot-long jaws and seven-inch-long teeth," he said. He wrote "JAWS—5 FT., TEETH—7 IN." down among the erasers.

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His students wrote, "The Parking Authority is run by a bunch of Nazis" and "Deanna + Todd," and "TRX has five feet."

After her Advanced Antecedents class, Dr. Sarah Wright collected her mail and took it to her office. There was a manila envelope from the State Department of Education, a letter from the Campus Parking Authority marked "Third Notice: Pay Your Outstanding Tickets Immediately," and a formal-looking square envelope from the dean's office, none of which she wanted to open.

She had no outstanding parking tickets, the legislature was going to cut state funding of universities by another 18 percent, and the letter from the dean was probably notifying her that the entire amount was going to come out of Paleontology's hide.

There was also a stapled brochure from a flight school she had written to during spring break after she had graded one hundred forty-three papers, none of which had gotten off the ground. The brochure had an eagle, some clouds, and the header, "Do you ever just want to get away from it all?"

She pried the staple free and opened it. "Do you ever get, like, fed up with your job and want to blow it off?" it read. "Do you ever feel like you just want to bag everything and do something really neat instead?"

It went on in this vein, which reminded her of her students' papers, for several illustrated paragraphs before it got down to hard facts, which were that the Lindbergh Flight Academy charged three thousand dollars for their course, "including private, commercial, instrument, CFI, CFII, written tests, and flight tests. Lodging extra. Not responsible for injuries, fatalities, or other accidents."

She wondered if the "other accidents" covered budget cuts from the legislature.

Her T.A., Chuck, came in, eating a Twinkie and waving a formal-looking square envelope. "Did you get one of these?" he asked.

"Yes," Sarah said, picking up hers. "I was just going to open it. What is it, an invitation to a slaughter?"

"No, a reception for some guy. The dean's having it this afternoon. In the Faculty Library."

Sarah looked at the invitation suspiciously. "I thought the dean was at an educational conference."

"She's back."

Sarah tore open the envelope and pulled out the invitation. "The dean cordially invites you to a reception for Dr. Jerry King," she muttered. "Dr. Jerry King?" She opened the manila envelope and scanned through the legislative report, looking for his name. "Who is he, do you know?"

"Nope."

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At least he wasn't one of the budget-cut supporters. His name wasn't on the list. "Did the rest of the department get these?"

"I don't know. Othniel got one. I saw it in his box," Chuck said. "I don't think he can reach it. His box is on the top row."

Dr. Robert Walker came in, waving a piece of paper. "Look at this! Another ticket for not having a parking sticker! I have a parking sticker! I have two parking stickers! One on the bumper and one on the windshield. Why can't they see them?"

"Did you get one of these, Robert?" Sarah asked, showing him the invitation. "The dean's having a reception this afternoon. Is it about the funding cuts?"

"I don't know," Robert said. "They're right there in plain sight. I even drew an arrow in Magic Marker to the one on the bumper."

"The legislature's cut our funding again," Sarah said. "I'll bet you anything the dean's going to eliminate a position. She was over here last week looking at our enrollment figures."

"The whole university's enrollment is down," Robert said, going over to the window and looking out. "Nobody can afford to go to college anymore, especially when it costs eighty dollars a semester for a parking sticker. Not that the stickers do any good. You still get parking tickets."

"We've got to fight this," Sarah said. "If she eliminates one of our positions, we'll be the smallest department on campus, and the next thing you know, we'll have been merged with Geology. We've got to organize the department and put up a fight. Do you have any ideas, Robert?"

"You know," Robert said, still looking out the window, "maybe if I posted someone out by my car—"

"Your car?"

"Yeah. I could hire a student to sit on the back bumper, and when the Parking Authority comes by, he could point to the sticker. It would cost a lot, but—Stop that!" he shouted suddenly. He wrenched the window open and leaned out. "You can't give me a parking ticket!" he shouted down at the parking lot. "I have two stickers! What are you, blind?" He pulled his head in and bolted out of the office and down the stairs, yelling, "They just gave me another ticket! Can you believe that?"

"No," Sarah said. She picked up the flight school brochure and looked longingly at the picture of the eagle.

"Do you think they'll have food?" Chuck said. He was looking at the dean's invitation.

"I hope not," Sarah said.

"Why not?"

"Grazing," she said. "The big predators always attacked when the hadrosaurs were grazing."

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"If they do have food, what kind do you think they'll have?" Chuck asked wistfully.

"It depends," Sarah said, turning the brochure over. "Tea and cookies, usually."

"Homemade?"

"Not unless there's bad news. Cheese and crackers means somebody's getting the ax. Liver pâté means a budget cut. Of course, if the budget cut's big enough, there won't be any money for refreshments."

On the back of the brochure it said in italics, *"Become Upwardly Mobile,"* and underneath, in boldface:

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"There have been radical changes in our knowledge of the dinosaurs over the past few years," Dr. Albertson said, holding the micropaleontology textbook up, "so radical that what came before is obsolete." He opened the book to the front. "Turn to the introduction."

His students opened their books, which had cost $64.95.

"Have you all turned to the introduction?" Dr. Albertson asked, taking hold of the top corner of the first page. "Good. Now tear it out." He ripped out the page. "It's useless, completely archaic."

Actually, although there had been some recent revisions in theories regarding dinosaur behavior and physiology, particularly the larger predators, there hadn't been any at all at the microscopic level. But Dr. Albertson had seen Robin Williams do this in a movie and been very impressed.

His students, who had been hoping to sell the textbooks back to the university bookstore for $32.47, were less so. One of them asked hopefully, "Can't we just promise not to read it?"

"Absolutely not," Dr. Albertson said, yanking out a handful of pages. "Come on. Tear them out."

He threw the pages in a metal wastebasket and held the wastebasket out to a marketing minor who was quietly tucking the torn-out pages into the back of the book with an eye to selling it as a pre-edited version. "That's right, all of them," Dr. Albertson said. "Every outdated, old-fashioned page."

Someone knocked on the door. He handed the wastebasket to the marketing minor and left the slaughter to open it. It was Sarah Wright with a squarish envelope.

"There's a reception for the dean this afternoon," she said. "We need the whole department there."

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"Do we have to tear out the title page, too?" a psychology minor asked.

"The legislature's just cut funding another 18 percent, and I'm afraid they're going to try to eliminate one of our positions," Sarah said.

"You can count on my support one hundred percent," he said.

"Good," Sarah said, sighing with relief. "As long as we stick together we've got a chance."

Dr. Albertson shut the door behind her, glancing at his watch. He had planned to stand on his desk before the end of class, but now there wouldn't be time. He had to settle for the inspirational coda.

"Ostracods, diatoms, fusilinids, these are what we stay alive for," he said. "*Carpe diem!* Sieze the day!"

The psych minor raised his hand. "Can I borrow your Scotch tape?" he asked. "I accidentally tore out Chapters One and Two."

There was brie at the reception. And sherry and spinach puffs and a tray of strawberries with cellophane-flagged toothpicks stuck like daggers into them. Sarah took a strawberry and a rapid headcount of the department. Everyone else seemed to be there except Robert, who was probably parking his car, and Dr. Othniel.

"Did you make sure Dr. Othniel saw his invitation?" she asked her T.A., who was eating strawberries two at a time.

"Yeah," Chuck said with his mouth full. "He's here." He gestured with his plate toward a high-backed wing chair by the fire.

Sarah went over and checked. Dr. Othniel was asleep. She went back over to the table and had another strawberry. She wondered which one was Dr. King. There were only three men she didn't recognize. Two of them were obviously Physics Department—they were making a fusion reactor out of a styrofoam cup and several of the fancy toothpicks. The third looked likely. He was tall and distinguished, and was wearing a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, but after a few minutes he disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a tray of liver pâté and crackers.

Robert came in, carrying his suit jacket and looking out of breath. "You will *not* believe what happened to me," he said.

"You got a parking ticket," Sarah said. "Were you able to find out anything about this Dr. King?"

"He's an educational consultant," Robert said. "What *is* the point of spending eighty dollars a semester for a parking sticker when there are never any places to park in the permit lots? You know where I had to park? Behind the football stadium! That's five blocks further away than my house!"

"An educational consultant?" Sarah said. "What's the dean up to?" She stared thoughtfully at her strawberry. "An educational consultant—"

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"Author of *What's Wrong with Our Entire Educational System,*" Dr. Albertson said. He took a plate and put a spinach puff on it. "He's an expert on restructionary implementation."

"What's that?" Chuck said, making a sandwich out of the liver pâté and two spinach puffs.

Dr. Albertson looked superior. "Surely they teach you graduate assistants about restructionary implementation," he said, which meant he didn't know either. He took a bite of spinach puff. "You should try these," he said. "I was just talking to the dean. She told me she made them herself."

"We're dead," Sarah said.

"There's Dr. King now," Dr. Albertson said, pointing to a lumbering man wearing a polo shirt and Sans-a-belt slacks.

The dean went over to greet him, clasping his hands in hers. "Sorry I'm late," he boomed out. "I couldn't find a parking place. I parked out in front."

Dr. Othniel suddenly emerged from the wing chair, looking wildly around. Sarah beckoned to him with her toothpick and he stooped his way over to them, sat down next to the brie and went back to sleep.

The dean moved to the center of the room and clapped her hands for attention. Dr. Othniel jerked at the sound. "I don't want to interrupt the fun," the dean said, "And *please,* do go on eating and drinking, but I just wanted you all to meet Dr. Jerry King. Dr. King will be working with the paleontology department on something I'm sure you'll all find terribly exciting. Dr. King, would you like to say a few words?"

Dr. King smiled, a large friendly grin that reminded Sarah of the practice jaw in Field Techniques. "We all know the tremendous impactization technology has had on our modern society," he said.

"Impactization?" Chuck said, eating a lemon tart the distinguished-looking gentleman had just brought out from the kitchen. "I thought *impact* was a verb."

"It is," Sarah said. "And once, back in the Late Cretaceous, it was a noun."

"Shh," Dr. Albertson said, looking disapproving.

"As we move into the twenty-first century, our society is transformizing radically, but is education? No. We are still teaching the same old subjects in the same old ways." He smiled at the dean. "Until today. Today marks the beginning of a wonderful innovationary experiment in education, a whole new instructional dynamic in teaching paleontology. I'll be thinktanking with you dinosaur guys and gals next week, but until then I want you to think about one word."

"Extinction," Sarah murmured.

"That word is *relevantness.* Does paleontology have relevantness to our

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modern society? How can we *make* it have relevantness? Think about it. Relevantness."

There was a spattering of applause from the departments Dr. King would not be thinktanking with. Robert poured a large glass of sherry and drank it down. "It's not fair," he said. "First the Parking Authority and now this."

"Pilots make a lot of money," Sarah said. "And the only word they have to think about is *crash*."

Dr. Albertson raised his hand.

"Yes?" the dean asked.

"I just wanted Dr. King to know," he said, "that he can count on my support one hundred percent."

"Are you supposed to eat this white crust thing on the cheese?" Chuck asked.

Dr. King put a memo in the Paleontology Department's boxes the next day. It read, "Group ideating session next Mon. Dr. Wright's office. 2 P.M. J. King. P.S. I will be doing observational datatizing this Tues. and Thurs."

"We'll all do some observational datatizing," Sarah said, even more alarmed by Dr. King's pre-empting her office without asking her than by the brie.

She went to find her T.A., who was in her office eating a Snickers. "I want you to go find out about Dr. King's background," she told him.

"Why?"

"Because he used to be a junior high girls' basketball coach. Maybe we can get some dirt on him and one of his seventh grade forwards."

"How do you know he used to be a junior high coach?"

"All educational consultants used to be junior high coaches. Or social studies teachers." She looked at the memo disgustedly. "What do you suppose observational datatizing consists of?"

Observational datatizing consisted of wandering around the halls of the Earth Sciences building with a clipboard listening to Dr. Albertson.

"Okay, how much you got?" Dr. Albertson was saying to his class. He was wearing a butcher's apron and a paper fast-food hat and was cutting apples into halves, quarters, and thirds with a cleaver, which had nothing to do with depauperate fauna, but which he had seen Edward James Olmos do in *Stand and Deliver*. He had been very impressed.

"Yip, that'll do it," he was saying in an Hispanic accent when Dr. King appeared suddenly at the back of the room with his clipboard.

"But the key question here is *relevantness*," Dr. Albertson said hastily. "How do the depauperate fauna affectate on our lives today?"

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His students looked wary. One of them crossed his arms protectively over his textbook as though he thought he was going to be asked to tear out more pages.

"Depauperate fauna have a great deal of relevantness to our modern society," Dr. Albertson said, but Dr. King had wandered back into the hall and into Dr. Othniel's class.

"The usual mode of the tyrannosaurus rex was to approach a herd of hadrosaurs from cover," Dr. Othniel, who did not see Dr. King because he was writing on the board, said. "He would then attack suddenly and retreat." He wrote, "1. OBSERVE, 2. ATTACK, 3. RETREAT," in a column on the board, the letters of each getting smaller and squinchier as he approached the chalk tray.

His students wrote, "1. Sneak up, 2. Bite ass, 3. Beat it," and "Todd called last night. I told him Traci wasn't there. We talked forever."

Dr. King wrote, "RELEVANTNESS?" in large block letters on his clipboard and wandered out again.

"The jaws and teeth of the tyrannosaurus were capable of inflicting a fatal wound with a single bite. It would then follow at a distance, waiting for its victim to bleed to death," Dr. Othniel said.

Robert was late to the meeting on Monday. "You will not believe what happened to me!" he said. "I had to park in the daily permit lot, and while I was getting the permit out of the machine, they gave me a ticket!"

Dr. King, who was sitting in Sarah's desk wearing a pair of grey sweats, a whistle, and a baseball cap with "Dan Quayle Junior High" on it, said, "I know you're all as excited about this educationing experiment we're about to embarkate on as I am."

"More," Dr. Albertson said.

Sarah glared at him. "Will this experiment involve eliminating positions?"

Dr. King smiled at her. His teeth reminded her of some she'd seen at the Denver Museum of Natural History. "Positions, classes, departments, all those terms are irrelevantatious. We need to reassessmentize our entire concept of education, its relevantatiousness to modern society. How many of you are using paradigmic bonding in your classes?"

Dr. Albertson raised his hand.

"Paradigmic bonding, experiential roleplaying, modular cognition. I assessmentized some of your classes last week. I saw no computer-learner linkages, no multimedial instruction, no cognitive tracking. In one class—" Dr. King smiled largely at Dr. Othniel, "I saw a blackboard being used. Methodologies like that are extinct."

"So are dinosaurs," Sarah muttered. "Why don't you say something, Robert?"

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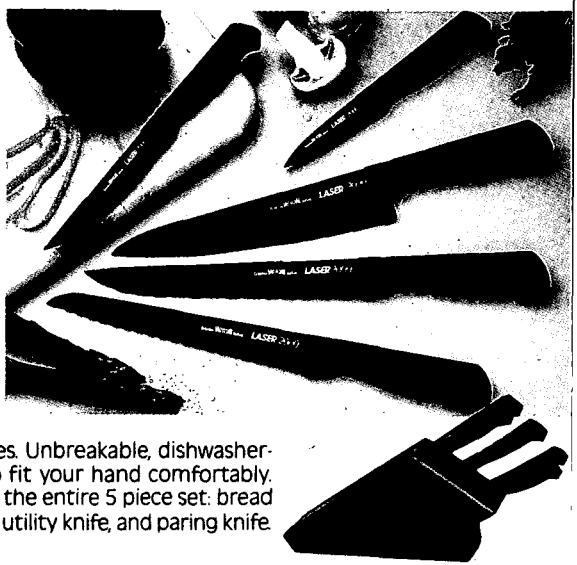

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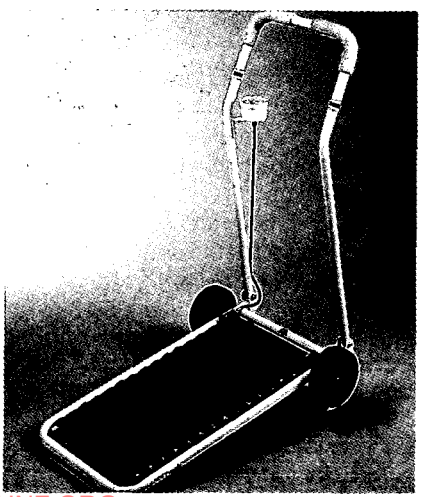

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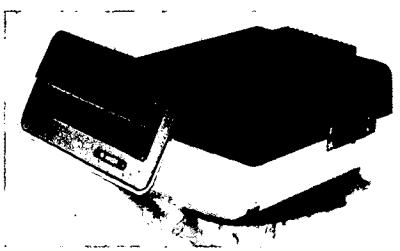

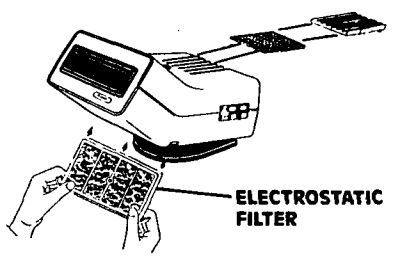

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"Dr. King," Robert said. "Do you plan to extend this reorganization to other departments?"

Good, Sarah thought, send him over to pester English Lit.

"Yes," Dr. King said, beaming. "Paleontology is only an initiatory pre-test. Eventually we intend to expand it to encompassate the entire university. Why?"

"There's one department that drastically needs reorganization," Robert said. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but the Parking Authority is completely out of control. The sign distinctly says you're supposed to park your car first and *then* go get the daily permit out of the machine."

"What did you find out about Dr. King?" Sarah asked Chuck Tuesday morning.

"He didn't coach junior high girls' basketball," he said, drinking a lime Slurpee. "It was junior high wrestling."

"Oh," Sarah said. "Then find out where he got his doctorate. Maybe we can get the college to rescind it for using words like *assessmentize.*"

"I don't think I'd better," Chuck said. "I mean, I've only got one semester till I graduate. And besides," he said, sucking on the Slurpee, "some of his ideas made sense. I mean, a lot of that stuff we learn in class does seem kind of pointless. I mean, what does the Late Cretaceous have to do with us really? It might be fun to roleplay and stuff."

"Fine," Sarah said. "Roleplay this. You are a coryhosaurus. You're smart and fast, but not fast enough because a tyrannosaurus rex has just taken a bite out of your flank. What do you do?"

"Gosh, that's a tough one," Chuck said, slurping meditatively. "What would you do?"

"Grow a wishbone."

Tuesday afternoon, as soon as her one o'clock class was over, Sarah went to Robert's office. He wasn't there. She waited outside for half an hour, reading the announcement for a semester at sea, and then went over to the Parking Authority office.

He was standing near the front of a line that wound down the stairs and out the door. It was composed mostly of students, though the person at the head of the line was a frail-looking old man. He was flapping a green slip at the young man behind the counter. The young man had a blond crewcut and looked like a adolescent Himmler.

". . . a heart attack," the old man at the head of the line was saying. Sarah wondered if he had had one when he got his parking ticket or if he intended to have one now.

Sarah tried to get to Robert, but two students were blocking the door. She recognized one of the freshmen from Dr. Othniel's class. "Oh, Todd,"

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she was saying to a boy in a tank undershirt and jeans, "I knew you'd help me. I tried to get Traci to come with me—I mean, after all, it was her car—but I think she had a date."

"A date?" Todd said.

"Well, I don't know for sure. It's hard to keep track of all her guys. I couldn't do that. I mean," she lowered her eyes demurely, "if you were *my* boyfriend, I'd never even think about other guys."

"Excuse me," Sarah said, "but I need to talk to Dr. Walker."

Todd stepped to one side, and instead of stepping to the other, the freshman from Dr. Othniel's class squeezed over next to him. Sarah slid past, and worked her way up to Robert, ignoring the nasty looks of the other people in line.

"Don't tell me you got a ticket, too," Robert said.

"No," she said. "We have to do something about Dr. King."

"We certainly do," Robert said indignantly.

"Oh, I'm so glad you feel that way. Dr. Othniel's useless. He doesn't even realize what's going on, and Dr. Albertson's giving a lecture on 'The Impactization of Microscopic Fossils on Twentieth Century Society.' "

"Which is what?"

"I have no idea. When I was in there he was showing a videotape of *The Land Before Time.*"

"I had a coronary thrombosis!" the old man shouted.

"Unauthorized vehicles are not allowed in permit lots," the Hitler Youth said. "However, we have initiated a preliminary study of the incident."

"A preliminary study!" the old man said, clutching his left arm. "The last one you did took five years!"

"We need another meeting with Dr. King," Sarah said. "We need to tell him relevance is not the issue, that paleontology is important in and of itself, and not because brontosaurus earrings are trendy. Surely he'll see reason. We have science and logic on our side."

Robert looked at the old man at the counter.

"What is there to study?" he was saying. "You ticketed the ambulance while the paramedics were giving me CPR!"

"I'm not sure reason will work," Robert said doubtfully.

"Well, then, how about a petition? We've got to do something, or we'll all be showing episodes of 'The Flintstones.' He's a dangerous man!"

"He certainly is," Robert said. "Do you know what I just got? A citation for parking in front of the Faculty Library."

"Will you forget about your stupid parking tickets for a minute?" Sarah said. "You won't have any reason to park unless we get rid of King. I know Albertson's students would all sign a petition. Yesterday he made them cut the illustrations out of their textbooks and make a collage."

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"The Parking Authority doesn't acknowledge petitions," Robert said. "You heard what Dr. King told the dean at the reception. He said, 'I'm parked right outside.' He left a note on his windshield that said the Paleontology Department had given him permission to park there." He waved the green paper at her. "Do you know where *I* parked? Fifteen blocks away. And I'm the one who gets a citation for improperly authorizing parking permission!"

"Goodbye, Robert," Sarah said.

"Wait a minute! Where are you going? We haven't figured out a plan of action yet."

Sarah worked her way back through the line. The two students were still blocking the door. "I'm sure Traci will understand," the freshman from Dr. Othniel's class was saying, "I mean, it isn't like you two were *serious* or anything."

"Wait a minute!" Robert shouted from his place in line. "What are you going to do?"

"Evolve," Sarah said.

On Wednesday there was another memo in Paleontology's boxes. It was on green paper, and Robert snatched it up and took off for the Parking Authority office, muttering dark threats. He was already there and standing in line behind a young woman in a wheelchair and two firemen when he finally unfolded it and read it.

"I *know* I was parking in a handicapped spot," the young woman was saying when Robert let out a whoop and ran back to the Earth Sciences building.

Sarah had a one o'clock class, but she wasn't there. Her students, who were spending their time waiting erasing marks in their textbooks so they could resell them at the bookstore, didn't know where she was. Neither did Dr. Albertson, who was making a papier-maché foraminifer.

Robert went into Dr. Othniel's class. "The prevalence of predators in the Late Cretaceous," Dr. Othniel was saying, "led to severe evolutionary pressures, resulting in aquatic and aeronautical adaptations."

Robert tried to get his attention, but he was writing "BIRDS" in the chalk tray.

He went out in the hall. Sarah's T.A. was standing outside her office, eating a bag of Doritos.

"Have you seen Dr. Wright?" Robert asked.

"She's gone," Chuck said, munching.

"Gone? You mean, resigned?" he said, horrified. "But she doesn't have to." He waved the green paper at Chuck. "Dr. King's going to do a preliminary study, a—what does he call it?—a preinitiatory survey of prevailing paleontological pedagogy. We won't have to worry about him for another five years at least."

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"She saw it," Chuck said, pulling a jar of salsa out of his back pocket. "She said it was too late. She'd already paid her tuition." He unscrewed the lid.

"Her tuition?" Robert said. "What are you talking about? Where did she go?"

"She flew the coop." He dug in the bag and pulled out a chip. He dipped it in the sauce. "Oh, and she left something for you." He handed Robert the jar of salsa and the chips and dug in his other back pocket. He handed Robert the flight brochure and a green plastic square.

"It's her parking sticker," Robert said.

"Yeah," Chuck said. "She said she won't be needing it where she's going."

"That's all? She didn't say anything else?"

"Oh yeah," he said, dipping a chip into the salsa Robert still held. "She said to watch out for falling rocks."

"The predatory dinosaurs flourished for the entire Late Cretaceous," Dr. Othniel said, "and then, along with their prey, disappeared. Various theories have been advanced for their extinction, none of which has been authoritatively proved."

"I'll bet they couldn't find a parking place," a student who had written one of the letters to the Parking Authority, and who had finally given up and traded his Volkswagen in on a skateboard, whispered.

"What?" Dr. Othniel said, looking vaguely around. He turned back to the board. "The diminishing food supply, the rise of mammals, the depredations of smaller predators, all undoubtedly contributed."

He wrote: "1. FOOD SUPPLY
2. MAMMALS
3. COMPETITION," on the bottom one-fifth of the board.

His students wrote, "I thought it was an asteroid," and "My new roommate Terri is trying to steal Todd away from me! Can you believe that?"

"The demise of the dinosaurs—" Dr. Othniel said, and stopped. He straightened slowly, vertebra by vertebra, until he was nearly erect. He lifted his chin, as if he were sniffing the air, and then walked over to the open window, leaned out, and stood there for several minutes, scanning the clear and empty sky.●

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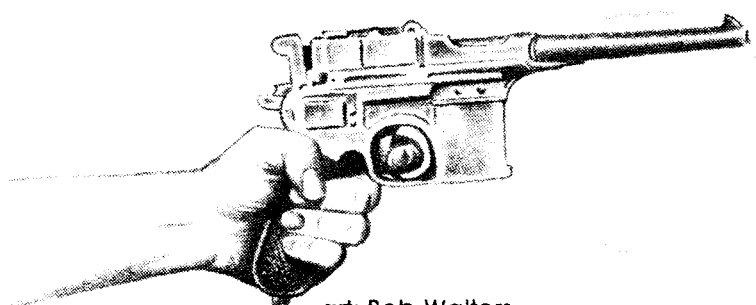
CELEBRATE THE BULLET

by Richard Paul Russo

Richard Paul Russo's second novel, *Destroying Angel*, will be published by Ace Books in July. Mr. Russo's first novel, *Subterranean Gallery*, was the winner of the 1990 Philip K. Dick Award. Wendy, the main character in the story that follows, played a relatively minor role in the author's earlier book.



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Wendy was taking pictures of a midnight beach party.

It wasn't much of a party, actually—five people she knew (all of them younger than she); and one guy none of them knew, who had been walking along the beach and joined them. There was a fire going, and a few feet from that, propped on a driftwood log, was a thirty inch color TV that Tony had brought, power cable snaking down to a big battery pack on the sand. On the screen, without sound, was a colorized version of an old Japanese monster movie about a giant mutant turtle that breathed fire and flew.

Wendy kept back from the fire, fiddling with her camera while the others drank beer and talked. The only one who seemed to be watching the TV was the guy they didn't know. Hicks, he'd said his name was; he'd been carrying two six-packs and so had been immediately invited to the party.

The fog was threatening to come back in, and the wind kicked up. Wendy zipped up her jacket, resumed adjusting her camera. She was using fast black-and-white film, no flash, making what she knew would be good guesses with the time exposures. She sat on the sand, set the camera on her knee for support, and took a picture of all six people, the fire, and the TV, the flickering image of the screen at a severe angle. Then she got up and backed further away, looked up at the moon slicing through the incoming fog, wondering if she could get it into a picture along with everything else.

"This movie SUCKS!" It was Hicks, and he sounded so angry everyone else stopped talking; the beach was suddenly quiet, the only sound the rolling hiss of the waves on the sloping sand.

"It's only a movie," Avra said. She laughed.

But Hicks sat there shaking his head. "I've had it," he said, and he pulled a gun from inside his jacket.

The gun was big, obviously real, and Wendy's chest tightened, catching her breath. Christ, she hated guns, even just looking at them. They scared the hell out of her, especially since most people really had no idea what they could do.

Hicks raised the gun, holding it with both hands, aimed it at the television set.

Tony scrambled to his feet, spilling beer onto the edges of the fire with a sizzling hiss.

"Hey!" Tony said. "Hey, come on, man, don't fuck around! I paid a hundred and fifty bucks for that TV!"

Hicks turned to Tony without moving the gun. "A hundred and fifty? Must have been stolen, then. That's a good TV."

"Shit, who cares if it was stolen?" Tony was holding up his hands,

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palms out toward Hicks. "It's a lot of money, man, so just freeze down a bit, all right? All right?"

Hicks nodded, turned back to the TV, and fired.

The explosion of the gun, loud and sudden in Wendy's ears, was followed almost immediately by another, much softer explosion as the bullet ripped into the TV and the picture tube burst into bright crackling light and shattering glass.

Tony grabbed the sides of his head, grimacing. "Oh, Jesus, you motherfucker! You out of your goddamn mind or . . . ?"

Tony stopped as Hicks brought the gun around, aimed it directly at Tony's chest.

"Oh, hey, man," Tony said, backing away. "Don't *fuck* with me like this, *Jesus!*"

The gun went off again, louder this time it seemed as Tony jerked back and sprawled face up on the sand. More sand scattered as the others around the fire, making strange crying sounds, scrambled to their feet and started running. Tony, on the other hand, wasn't moving at all.

Wendy, too, remained motionless for a few moments, in a kind of stunned paralysis. Chest aching, unable to move, she watched Hicks rise to his feet, walk over to Tony, and hold out the gun again, this time aimed down at Tony's face. Wendy turned and broke into a run as the shot sounded.

Her feet sank in the soft sand as she ran up the slope, and her breath quickly became ragged and harsh. The slope steepened into sand banks leading up to the road, and Wendy scrambled up on hands and knees, pulling herself along by grabbing tufts of the long grasses growing out of the sand. There were no more gunshots, no sounds at all except her own painful breath.

The sand leveled out. Wendy stepped over the knee-high wire and wood fence and ran out onto the Great Highway, which was empty of traffic; distant approaching headlights were visible, but more than half a mile away. She stopped for a moment and looked back out over the beach, but saw no one coming. Down near the water, the fire continued to burn, flames whipping in the breeze; a few feet from the fire was Tony's dark, motionless form. Wendy turned away and hurried across the black pavement, down another grass and sand bank, and headed for the motel and restaurant down the road near the end corner of Golden Gate Park.

In front of the restaurant was a pair of empty phone booths. Wendy stepped into one, keeping the door open and watching the road. She picked up the receiver and dialed 911. It only took her fifteen minutes to get through.

Wendy had given the cops the story of what had happened, along with

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a description of Hicks, but had refused to give her name. Later, maybe, she would go to them, see if there was anything else she could do, but she'd have to think damn hard about it. With half a dozen arrests by the police on obscenity and various other charges because of her photography, it was hard to imagine going to them voluntarily.

She remained in the phone booth looking up at the Great Highway, half expecting to see Hicks (if that really was his name) appear on the road above her, gun in hand. Two cars drove slowly past, headed south, then another headed north, but no one appeared on foot, and Wendy wondered what had happened to the others.

She stepped out of the phone booth, slowly climbed the bank back up to the road. It would be a while before the cops arrived, enough time to go back to the fire, see how things were. It was crazy, she told herself, but she knew she'd do it if it looked safe, though she didn't really want to admit why.

The fog, which she'd thought was coming in, had broken up almost completely, and the moon, nearly full, shone brightly on the road, giving the asphalt a ragged, liquid sheen. Wendy crossed the sand banks, stepped over the low fence, and stood at the edge of a grass-covered drift.

The fire was still burning, though low now, more glowing embers than flames; the orange glow, even from this distance, pulsed like an irregular heartbeat, fanned by the breeze. The beach was deserted. To the north she could see a few waving, flickering lights in the upper levels of the old Ocean Beach condo ruins; further on were the remains of the Cliff House, dark ragged hulks of shadow on the jutting point of land, stone illuminated by the moon. All around Wendy, with the silver light of the moon and the darkness of the night, the world looked as if it had been created all in black and white except for the tiny spot of orange flame near the water's edge.

Wendy glanced once more in all directions, then started down the bank toward the fire. As she walked, she could make out the shape of Tony's body a few feet away from the fire, the shape of the blasted TV. She conceived possible shots in her mind, considered the different camera angles, tried to calculate the effect of the moonlight. You're sick, Wendy, she told herself, you're *sick*. And she did feel sick, nausea rolling through her stomach and bringing up acid into her throat, but she knew it wouldn't stop her.

When she reached the fire, Wendy skirted the glowing embers and approached Tony's body. The blood, which at first glance seemed to be everywhere, looked black rather than red—shiny where it had pooled on his chest and what was left of his face; duller where it had spread out and soaked into the sand. If she had not seen what had happened, she didn't think she would even have known it was Tony.

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Feeling still sicker now, Wendy brought the camera up and began adjusting it with shaking fingers. A close-up first, of the body, the moon from behind and just to the side. Somehow she managed to make her mind work and concentrate on the photograph she was about to take, managed to stop the shaking of her hands and fingers long enough to set the exposure, focus the lens, snap the picture.

Wendy moved around the body, the glowing fire, the shattered television set, taking one picture after another; between shots her hands shook, but each time she prepared a shot she managed to steady herself long enough to click the shutter. Before long, as she moved further and further away with each shot, Wendy realized she was crying. Tears streamed steadily down her face, salty to the taste when she licked them from the corners of her mouth.

But none of it, not the tears, not the nausea rolling through her, not even the self-disgust stopped her from taking the pictures, and it wasn't until she heard the faint wail of approaching sirens that Wendy lowered the camera, snapped on the lens cover, and, still crying, ran back up the slope toward the moonlit road.

She woke once in the night, a clawing desperation bringing her slowly, painfully out of a dream she could remember nothing of except a hollow feeling of dread. Wendy sat up in bed, sweating in the windowless, cinderblock room, the darkness heavy and cloying. Vibrations from machinery below her rumbled through the room. She leaned against the wall, pressed her face against the cold, trembling stone.

For a long time she remained motionless, eyes open though she could not see a thing, listening to the muted chug of machinery. Then she slipped back down between the sheets, pulled the blankets tight around her, and waited for sleep, almost hoping it wouldn't come.

In the morning, Wendy bought a newspaper, sat reading through it in a coffee shop down the street from her rooms. On the front page was a huge photograph of the second space station, which had just been officially completed after eleven years, three major accidents, sixty-seven deaths. In the lower corner was a photo of the President seated at a monitor in Kennedy Space Center, headset on, congratulating the station commander.

As for killings and other deaths, there were plenty in the paper—a multiple stabbing on Market Street in the Financial district, a street person who had flipped out and started attacking people with a large kitchen knife, killing a woman attorney and injuring half a dozen other people; a woman who had shot and killed her husband, their two dogs,

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then herself; an eight-year-old boy who had been crushed to death in an abandoned building that had collapsed.

Nowhere, though, could she find anything about what had happened on the beach. She knew it had probably been too late to make the morning paper, but she had hoped there would be something anyway. Why? She didn't really know. She had seen far more than she would ever learn from a news account.

Around noon she called in sick to the print shop, then tried calling Avra, but there was no answer. She didn't know how to get in touch with any of the others who had been on the beach, and wasn't sure she really wanted to. She bought an early edition of the afternoon paper and read it on the cement porch of the building she lived in, the cement vibrating slightly beneath her. Half the ground floor of the building was a dry-cleaning operation, and the machines ran day and night. The other half was supposedly an upholstery shop, but machinery ran day and night inside it as well, far louder than the dry-cleaners, rumbling and chugging beneath her apartment; Wendy felt certain something else was being done in the shop, something illegal, but she really didn't care what.

Her apartment was on the second floor, above the upholstery shop, part of a collection of illegal apartments and tiny offices. The apartment was small, but had three rooms including her darkroom, a stove and sink for a kitchen, a shower and toilet of her own, and a tiny wall heater that kept the worst chill out of the air—all she needed.

She found it—a short article in the second section, no picture. There wasn't much to it, two paragraphs saying a body had been found out on Ocean Beach about one A.M., apparently shot to death (apparently?). No name was given. Police speculated that it was a drug-related shooting.

Wendy leaned against the stone wall, feeling the vibrations trembling through her, listening to the muted hisses and groans, and began slowly, methodically, tearing the newspaper to shreds.

She spent the afternoon in the darkroom, developing then printing the pictures from the night before. She didn't know what she expected —maybe shots of Hicks's face, details of his clothing, pictures she could take to the police (if she could bring herself to do that; if they would even listen to her)—but there was nothing like that. There *were* pictures of Hicks, but none that showed his face, none that could identify him in any way.

And then there were the pictures of Tony. She'd made small enlargements, to about 5 × 7, and clipped then up on the wall. First was a close-up of his face, taken early in the evening while Tony was building the fire. He was bent over, features set in concentration, light and shadow from the flames in irregular patterns across his skin. Next was a shot of

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Tony and Avra laughing and throwing sand at one another just a few feet from the fire. Then came the series of pictures after Tony was dead: a close-up of what remained of his face; his sprawled body with the darker splotches of blood on the sand around his head; then several more shots from a gradually increasing distance until the last, which took in the dying embers of the fire, the shattered television set, scattered beer cans, Tony's body, the reflecting ocean in the background, and in the upper right corner, just barely in the picture, the shining silver light of the moon.

Wendy sat on her work stool, a few feet back from the pictures, and stared at them. The sick feelings of the night before were gone, replaced by a heavy numbing effect. But there was something in the pictures, something that slowly dug into her gut and into her heart, cutting away the numbness, something that made her ache all over, but which she did not understand. Something either in the photographs or in the circumstances surrounding them, that was important, that Wendy felt she should be seeing. But she did not know what it was.

Late that night, long after dark, Wendy went to the Bomb Shelter. The Bomb Shelter was half pub, half nightclub; half indoors, half outdoors. It had been built up hodge-podge around and under the ruins of a freeway overpass that had been accidentally blown up two years before by a performance art troupe. Seven people had been killed, including three of the four troupe members. The surviving performance artist had started building the Bomb Shelter as soon as he had been released from the hospital, and now ran the entire complex.

In the outdoor section, covered by huge sheets of canvas stretched high above the tables, a thin bearded man played an electric sitar on a platform that served as a stage. Most of the outdoor tables were empty, and his audience consisted of about ten people clustered around the platform and drinking; two of them were asleep or passed out, heads and arms on their tables.

It was too damn cold outdoors, so Wendy went inside. The interior of the Bomb Shelter was a series of makeshift chambers connected by narrow, dimly lit passages. Those walls not formed by the concrete remains of the freeway were built of wood, brick, stone, patched sheetrock, old mattresses wedged between sheets of metal, wire-bound bundles of flattened cardboard. Each chamber held half a dozen tables, all with fat, flickering candles, and had speakers mounted in the ceiling corners, now emiting crystal clear ether jazz. Paintings and drawings and photographs hung on the walls, and desiccated plants grew from clay pots in the corners.

Nearly all the tables were occupied. In the second chamber there was

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a single empty table in the corner, and Wendy sat at it, facing one of her own photographs hanging on the opposite wall. It was a large black and white close-up of Kit. Kit was almost in profile, her eyes partially closed, gazing downward, her skin tight with a smile.

Wendy sat staring at the picture, arms and chest aching. She missed Kit. They had worked together on several major art projects over a period of three or four years, but now Kit was dead. She had died a year before, of "the white monkey," as she had put it. Kit had called it "the white monkey" for two reasons. First, because AIDS was thought by some to have originated in African monkeys, and second, since Kit had never had sex with anyone, male or female, she was certain she'd picked it up in her needle freak days when she mainlined cocaine, her own "personal white monkey."

No matter what you called it, though, Wendy thought, Kit was dead. Kit and Will and Laskey from AIDS; Tony now, from a bullet, Skipper and Marty from bullets, Slake several years ago probably from bullets as well in some damn Central American jungle; Sheridan and Manny and Bobo from street-sliced drugs; and Kelly beaten to death by the cops. All these people she knew, dead before they were thirty-five. Wendy was nearly forty now, and she knew it wasn't really that old, but Christ, sometimes she *felt* old.

Wendy pulled all her cash from her pockets, counted it. It would be enough. She couldn't afford it, but right now it didn't matter. She looked at the picture of Kit, tried to imagine what one of the close-ups of Tony's shattered face would look like up on the concrete wall.

Carla, one of the regular waitresses, came up to the table, smiling. "Wendy, how you doing? What can I get you?"

"Jack Daniels," Wendy said. "A bottle."

Carla's smile disappeared. "A bottle?"

Wendy nodded. "A bottle, a glass, and ice."

Carla nodded, moved slowly away, and Wendy was alone again.

She was going to get drunk tonight. Wendy only got drunk two or three times a year, but this was going to be one of them. It would take a long time, because she would drink slowly, and because, though she rarely drank, she always held her liquor well. But she would get drunk, so smashed she would hardly remember a thing in the morning.

Carla came back with a bottle of Jack Daniels, a box of ice, and a glass. "Are you okay, Wendy?"

"I'm fine," Wendy said. She paid, and Carla left without another word.

Wendy put two pieces of ice in the glass, then filled it with Jack Daniels. She held the glass up, gestured with it toward Kit's picture, then started to drink.

* * *

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She woke in darkness to a terrible pounding in the walls, a hammering at the floor beneath her. The bed shook with the vibrations, and for a moment Wendy thought some massive piece of machinery was going to break through the walls or floor, shattering cinderblock, destroying her room.

I'm still drunk, she told herself. And she was, but she wondered how much that had to do with the hammering sounds in the room, or the vibrations in the walls and floor. Upholstery shop my ass, she thought.

Wendy rolled out of bed, got to her feet and staggered into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and relieved herself, amazed that her bladder could hold so much without more pain.

In the bathroom the pounding was quieter, and the vibration of the walls was less violent. She remained seated for a few minutes, holding her head in her hands. Her mouth was dry, and her head felt stuffed with cotton. She didn't want to move.

Wendy stood and went to the sink, ran cold water and splashed it over her face. It didn't help much. She started back toward the bedroom, but the pounding was too loud and jarring to her head. She went in, grabbed the pillow and a blanket from the bed, and returned to the bathroom.

She wrapped herself in the blanket, stuffed the pillow into the back corner and lay down between the toilet and the wall, where the pounding was quietest. She slept.

She didn't have much of a hangover in the morning. The pounding sounds were gone, and only the normal thrumming and vibrations remained. She felt almost rested.

After a quick shower, Wendy tried calling Avra. This time Avra's roommate answered the phone, but said Avra had come in late last night, stayed only an hour or so, then left, and she hadn't seen Avra since.

Wendy took a bus into the Mission to see Libby. A low overcast obscured the sun, kept the morning a dark gray. She dozed against the scratched window, holding her shirt over her nose to filter out the stink from the woman lying on the seat in front of her.

Libby lived in a three-room cottage on a quiet dead-end street that always smelled of anise, especially on hot days. Wendy stepped up onto the small cement porch, rang the doorbell, then stood back so Libby could get a good look at her through the peephole. A few moments later she heard the dead-bolts being thrown, the two chains being unhooked, then the knob turned and the door opened.

"Wendy." Libby stood in the open door, smiling, her arms held out. They embraced, then went inside, Libby shutting and locking the door behind them.

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As usual, books and magazines and newspapers were piled and scattered all over the front room; those stacked on or near Libby's work table dealt primarily with genetics and quantum mechanics. On the PC monitor, a toroid-shaped diagram shifted jerkily from one position to another.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting," Wendy said.

Libby shook her head. "I was about to go out in the garden, take a break while this program runs. C'mon, I've got a fresh pot of coffee in the Chemex."

They walked into the kitchen, where Wendy picked up two glass mugs and the Chemex, and Libby picked up her shotgun; then they went out into the backyard garden. Wendy hated the shotgun, it always made her nervous, but there was no way she could complain about it. A year and a half before, Libby's sister Diedre, who had shared the cottage with Libby, had been stabbed to death while sunbathing in the back yard. Libby had bought the shotgun the following week.

They sat in two deck chairs facing the garden. Wendy set the coffee and mugs on the wooden table between them, poured the coffee while Libby propped the shotgun against the redwood planter box beside her. Above, the overcast was burning off, and the sun broke through, bringing out the colors of the garden. Tall, thick green shrubs lined the back fence, and a path of coarse gravel curled through lush beds of flowers and herbs—irises, hydrangeas, oregano, parsley maybe, and a lot of others Wendy didn't know the names of.

Wendy sipped at the strong, hot coffee, then closed her eyes and leaned her head back, letting the warmth of the sun bathe her face. She could smell the oregano, and flower scents she couldn't identify, and a trace of anise from the street, and the coffee in her hands. She felt warm and peaceful, a pleasant lethargy suffusing her body.

"Something's eating at you," Libby said. "When you come over and start sitting back with your eyes closed and get quiet, that usually means something's bothering you. Something you want to get away from."

"This place always relaxes me," Wendy said. "Sitting out here in the garden with you. Sometimes I wish I could go somewhere like this permanently. Out of the city, away from people, away from the world."

"Wendy, what is it?"

Wendy didn't say anything for a long time, but eventually she opened her eyes, turned to face Libby. She told Libby what had happened to Tony. She told her about the pictures she took.

"You're a photographer," Libby said. "Taking photographs is what you do."

"Sure, but like that? Sometimes I think it's *all* I do, and sometimes I think I must be sick. No matter what happens in my life, no matter how

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awful, I take pictures of it. I'm beginning to think I can't even see the world around me in a normal way anymore." She paused, looked away, up at what was left of the overcast. "When I think of Tony now, I see an image of his ruined face, not as I *saw* it that night, but as it appears in the photograph I took. I wonder if I'm capable of seeing the world in any other way."

There was a long silence, then Libby said, "Want some amateur analysis?"

Wendy softly laughed. "Sure."

"The world is pretty fucked up, *people* are pretty fucked up. And it all seems to just be getting worse."

"I won't argue that."

"Okay. Things are getting worse, but on top of that, a lot of the shit that goes down seems pretty irrational, and meaningless. Pointless. Like some stranger shooting up a TV and then killing someone, apparently without reason. Like a young woman getting stabbed to death in her own back yard, again apparently without reason."

Libby paused, looking at Wendy though Wendy half expected her to turn away. Wendy didn't say anything, and eventually Libby nodded once and resumed.

"So a lot of it doesn't make sense. Causality is suspect, sort of like quantum mechanics on a social scale, let's say. How do people deal with a world like that? A lot of them don't. They retreat, either physically or mentally withdraw from the world. A lot of others ignore most of what they see, or learn to *not* see what they don't want to see or what they can't deal with. Head in the sand.

"But not you, Wendy. You can't do that, you *see* the world around you, and maybe when you take photographs, what you're doing is giving the world some structure, enough so that you *can* see it for what it is and still live with it, without going out of your mind." She paused, smiled. "Maybe." She paused again. "There, that's my lecture for the day."

Wendy watched Libby for a minute, then shrugged. "I guess it makes a kind of sense, though I don't know that it does me much good."

"Maybe make it easier to accept what you do, taking pictures."

Wendy shook her head. "And maybe the best thing would be to just stop taking photographs altogether."

"You serious?"

"I'm thinking about it."

Libby didn't say anything, just slowly shook her head. Wendy shrugged again, drank from her coffee, then closed her eyes once more and stretched out on the chair to take in the heat from the sun above her.

It was midnight by the time she got off work at the print shop, and nearly one by the time she got home. The streets were quiet, and as she

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approached her building she could hear the faint sounds of machinery from the dry cleaners and the upholstery shop. For some reason, she found the steady sounds comforting.

Wendy started up the steps leading to the porch, then stopped when she heard a muffled whimper. She looked into the porch shadows, saw a huddled form pressed into the back corner.

"Wendy?" The voice was plaintive, little more than a whisper. And familiar.

"Avra?" She hurried up the steps, knelt beside the huddled figure as Avra tilted her face up and into the light.

"Hey," Avra whispered. Her eyes were puffy and red, her face streaked with tears and dark make-up, and her nose looked swollen, though it wasn't bruised. She was wearing a lightweight jacket over a T-shirt, and she was shaking, though Wendy didn't know if it was from the cold or something else. Wendy put a hand on Avra's shoulder.

"Hey yourself," she said. "Are you all right?"

Avra nodded, then shook her head. "I'm a wreck," she said.

Wendy helped her to her feet, Avra's legs buckling under her twice. "Are you hurt?" Wendy asked. Avra shook her head. "Let's get you inside." Wendy unlocked the building door, guided Avra through, and locked it behind them, still supporting Avra. Avra was crying now, and Wendy led her up the stairs to the second floor, then down the silent, dimly lit hall to her apartment.

Once inside, Wendy sat Avra down at the kitchen table, where Avra continued to quietly cry, holding her head in her hands. "Want me to fix you some coffee or tea or something? A drink?"

Avra looked up, brushing hair out of her eyes, and nodded. "Coffee." She blinked several times, then said, "I need to use your bathroom."

"Go ahead, you know where it is, I'll just get this started."

Avra got up and staggered out of the kitchen. Wendy turned the stove on under the kettle and prepared the Melitta with a filter and ground coffee. She heard the toilet flush, then water running in the bathroom sink. She leaned against the stove, listening and waiting, wondering what was going on in Avra's head.

The water boiled, and Wendy was pouring it over the coffee when Avra came back in. Her hair was pulled back from her face now, and the streaked tears and make-up had been washed away, but her eyes were still puffy, still red. She sat at the table, silent until Wendy poured coffee for both of them, brought it to the table and sat across from her.

"Thanks," Avra said. She held the coffee cup in her hands, but didn't drink.

"What happened?" Wendy asked.

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Avra stared at Wendy as if confused. "What do you mean, what happened? You were there, you *saw* what happened to Tony. You saw . . . ." She didn't finish, shaking her head.

"No, I meant to you. What happened to *you*, Avra?"

Avra looked down at the table. "Nothing." She sipped at the coffee, shook her head again, then said, "Nothing at all has happened to me, but I'm falling apart, Wendy. I just don't know what to do anymore."

"What is it, Avra?"

Avra didn't say anything at first, still staring at the table, breathing slowly and deeply. "Tony's dead," she finally said. Then nothing more.

"I know," Wendy said after a long silence. There was another long silence, Avra gazing down at the table, now tugging rhythmically at her hair with one hand. "Avra," Wendy said. "Have you been dropping anything?"

Avra looked up, nodded once. "I took some downers. I had to, I was so wired, going crazy all over the city, I had to take something to cool me out."

"How many?"

"Only a few, you don't have to worry." Avra stuck her hands in her jacket pockets, fumbled through them, then pulled out a blank-labeled prescription bottle. She shook the bottle, which sounded about half full. "See? There's plenty left." She set the bottle on the table, looked at Wendy. "I'm a wreck," she said again.

"What's been going on, Avra?"

Avra sighed heavily, gazed up at the ceiling. "You know it's only been two days since it happened," she said. "It feels like a fucking week." She drank some more of her coffee, looked back at Wendy. "I've been going out of my goddamn mind, that's what's been going on. You know what keeps happening? I keep seeing Hicks. I turn a corner, and there he is, coming toward me, and I just know he's got that goddamn gun with him, hidden somewhere, and he's going to kill me with it. My heart just breaks apart and I can't move, I'm so fucking scared, I can't even breathe. Only then when the guy gets closer, it's not Hicks, just some guy walking along, minding his own business. It's never Hicks. But you know how many times it's happened in the last two days? Christ, I don't know, dozens, it doesn't matter where I am in the city, I keep thinking I see him, I keep thinking he's after me." She was shaking again, the coffee cup trembling in her hands, and she put it down, but kept her grip on it, squeezing with both hands. "I'm afraid to go home, I know it's crazy, but I keep thinking he knows where I live, that he'll go there to find me."

"Avra. . . ." Wendy started. But she didn't go on. She wanted to tell Avra there was no way Hicks could know where she lived, that she was probably one of the last people Hicks would even want to see, but she

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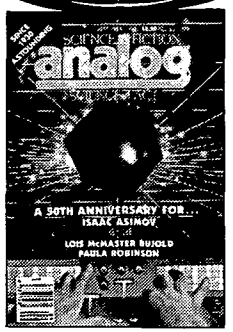

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realized Avra already knew all that, and hearing it again wasn't going to make any difference.

"You know what the worst of it is?" Avra said. "It hits me that it doesn't matter if I never see Hicks again, some *other* lunatic is liable to just pull out a gun and shoot me for no reason at all. And that's when I really start to flip out, because I start looking around me, and I realize it could be *anyone*, at any time." She paused. "It could even be you, for all I fucking know."

"Avra. . . ."

"I know, I know, that's crazy, but that's what I keep thinking." She began shaking her head again. "It's impossible to know, impossible to be safe. Just . . . impossible," she whispered.

Wendy looked at Avra, feeling helpless. Avra *was* falling apart, but Wendy didn't know what she could do to help.

"Have you seen any of the others?" she asked.

Avra nodded. "Yeah. Spence. But he won't talk about it, he won't even listen to me, he just puts his hands over his ears and makes noise, like a goddamn little kid, trying to pretend it never happened. I've tried to get hold of Billi and Corinne, but I haven't been able to yet. There's no point, anyway." She began to shake her head once more. "Tony . . . Tony . . . Tony." She was staring at the table again.

Wendy got up from the table. "I'll be back in a minute," she said. When Avra didn't respond, Wendy walked out of the kitchen and went into the darkroom. She took down the two pictures she'd taken of Tony before the shooting—the one of Tony at the fire, and the one of Tony and Avra throwing sand at each other—and brought them back into the kitchen.

Avra was now gazing into her coffee cup, motionless except for her regular breathing, the blinking of her eyes. Wendy set the pictures on the table in front of her.

"I took these that night," Wendy said. "Thought maybe you'd like to have them."

Avra switched her gaze from the coffee cup to the pictures, and reached out to touch first one, then the other. She looked up at Wendy.

"Why?" she asked. "Why was Tony killed? *Why?* Can you answer that for me, Wendy?"

Wendy slowly shook her head. "No, Avra, I can't."

"Of course you can't, because there is no answer. There was no fucking reason for Hicks to kill him, there was no fucking reason for him to die." She turned back to the pictures, picked them up, and began crying once again. "There's no fucking reason for anything."

Again, Wendy felt helpless. She sat across from Avra, watching her, wanting to say something, to keep talking, but she didn't know what to say. Eventually Avra stopped crying, but continued to stare at the two

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pictures, silent and unmoving. Her eyes seemed glazed, as if she were no longer actually seeing the pictures.

Wendy finally got up and went to Avra's side, put her arm around Avra's shoulder and held her. "You'll stay here tonight, won't you?" Avra nodded, and Wendy said, "Come on, then, it's late. I think we both could use some sleep."

Avra nodded again, and held on to Wendy for support as she got to her feet. They went into the bedroom and set up a foam pad and sleeping bag for Avra. Avra crawled into the sleeping bag with all her clothes on, reached out and put her hand against the cinderblock wall.

"I always liked this here," she said. "The machines. They're kind of soothing."

Wendy nodded, but didn't say anything. She undressed, got into the bed and lay on her side, looking at Avra. "You all right now?"

Avra rolled her head from side to side. "No. But I will be."

Neither said anything more, and Wendy finally turned off the nightstand lamp, bringing darkness to the room. She lay awake a long time, listening to Avra quietly crying a few feet away from her, and waited for sleep.

Wendy awoke in darkness, disoriented and groggy. She lay without moving for a minute, wondering what had awakened her. A dream? A sound? She could hear nothing but the steady thrum of machinery from below. Then she realized she didn't even hear Avra's breathing.

"Avra?" she whispered. She looked through the darkness at the sleeping bag, but Avra wasn't in it.

Wendy got out of bed and went to the closed bedroom door, which she was sure she had left open. She opened it and stepped out into the hall. The kitchen light was on, and so was the bathroom light. "Avra?" she called. No answer.

She went into the kitchen. The coffee cups and the pictures were still on the table, but there was no one in the room. She backed out, went down the hall and into the bathroom. "Avra?"

Wendy stopped in the doorway, breath catching in her chest. Avra sat on the floor between the toilet and the wall, in the same place Wendy had slept the night before; her head leaned against the porcelain tank, and her eyes were closed. For a brief moment she thought Avra was asleep, but then she saw the prescription bottle on the sink, lying on it's side, empty.

She remained absolutely still for a minute, not even breathing, staring at the motionless figure on the floor. "No," she said. "Jesus Christ, Avra, no." She turned into the wall and banged her fist against it once, pressing her face into the doorjamb. "Avra why, for Christ's sake? Why?"

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Wendy closed her eyes and held onto the wall, her chest aching terribly, barely able to breathe. There was a rushing sound in her ears, and she clamped her jaw tight, digging her chin into the wood. She did not move except for a tense trembling.

After a minute or two, she pushed away from the wall, turned and looked at Avra. Then she moved forward and knelt in front of her. Knowing what she would feel, Wendy put her hand to Avra's throat, back toward her ear. There was no pulse, and Avra's skin already felt cold to her. She moved her hand to Avra's face, putting it in front of her nose and mouth. Nothing.

"Oh, Avra." Wendy remained on her knees, gazing at the still body, her mind unable to hold a coherent thought. She stared into Avra's lifeless face, searching. Was there at least peace there? She continued staring, and finally decided no, there was no peace, there was nothing there at all.

Wendy sat on the cold bathroom floor, her back against the wall, her feet touching Avra's legs. For a moment she felt scared, though scared of what she didn't know. Then a numbing sensation began to seep through her, took the fear and everything else away, and for a long time she did not move.

Wendy came out onto the beach at dawn. The sun was not yet visible behind her, and the sky was a dark gray growing slowly lighter. Exhausted and numb, she staggered down the dry sandy slope toward the water. It was low tide, and the water seemed far away.

She searched the beach, but there were no signs of what had happened two nights before—nothing remained of the shattered television set, the charred stones of the fire, the beer cans, the blood.

Wendy continued down the slope, struggling in the dry, sinking sand until she reached the wet hard-pack near the water. With the tide so low, there were several fingers of rock and gravel exposed far down the slope, the gravel sounding like rolling marbles as the tips of the waves washed over it. Something shiny on the nearest split of rock caught her eye, and she walked over to it, skirting the waves as they hissed up the sand.

It was a gun. *The* gun? she wondered. Wendy stood at the edge of the jumble of rock and gravel and stared down at the weapon. It looked like the gun Hicks had used, but there was no way to know. No, that wasn't true, she could find out, she could take it in to the cops. Ballistics, she thought. For some reason, she liked the sound of that word.

But it really didn't matter whether or not it was the same gun. The gun hadn't killed Tony, a bullet had. Or two bullets. Shot by a human being.

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A wave came in, swirled an inch or two deep around her shoes, and Wendy looked away from the gun, out onto the ocean. Maybe it *was* time to stop taking pictures, she thought. Just stop. Time to leave the city, go somewhere quiet and isolated, some small town where she could have a garden like Libby's, but away from the city, away from people. Time to get *out*.

She fingered the exposed roll of film in her jacket pocket, film that held the images of a dead young woman wedged between a toilet and a cinderblock wall, a picture of an empty vial on a porcelain sink, a picture of a kitchen table with two half empty coffee cups and two black and white photos.

Yes, time to leave. What she should do, she told herself, is take her camera, the film, and the gun at her feet, and heave them all out into the sea, as far as she could throw them. Let it all sink beneath the waves where it would disappear, at least for decades, maybe for centuries. And maybe forever. Then she could leave the city and do something else with her life.

She didn't move. The sun was coming up over the city, and now reflected off the gun at her feet. She raised her camera, took off the lens cover, adjusted the exposure.

Wendy stepped back, aimed the camera at the gun, and focused. She waited until the next wave came in, washing over the gun and soaking her shoes, then, as the water slid back down the slope, exposing the gun once again, now shiny and clean, she snapped the picture.●

FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

A CONJUGATION OF THE VERB TO BE

I am; You are; He is; She, too;
They are—but are They You?

You say They're not, but You might be
As like to Them as He or She.

But I'll not be a part of Them.
I make no excuse, am what I am—

And that is true of Us as well.
Scoff if You will: We think We're swell.

—Tom Disch

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IT'S A JOB

by Isaac Asimov

Our modern Cupid, George, again sets out to further the cause of love...

art: Gary Freeman

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I had been noticing it all through dinner and by now I had decided it was unmistakable. George had an undeniable look of prosperity about him.

Not much, you understand. It was just that his jacket sleeve looked less frayed, his tie more neatly knotted, his cheeks a little pinker. It was no use actually trying to spot the individual changes that made up the impression. It was the impression as a whole.

Nothing in the world would make George look like anything but a deadbeat, but somehow today the beat seemed to have a wan spark of life in it.

"George," I said, "you haven't done something desperate like getting a job, have you?"

He winced, and took a quick sip of wine. Then he said to me haughtily, "Didn't your mother ever tell you that there are some subjects that aren't proper in civilized discourse? A j— a j—"

"A job," I said, helping out.

"I can say it," he answered with asperity. "I'm just too much of a decent human being to say it in connection with myself."

"Well, then, George, what accounts for your altogether unaccountable air of not being utterly and completely broke?"

"Ah, I see. You are impressed by my devil-may-care impression of munificence. —Actually, I made a small investment that paid off rather handsomely."

"To the extent of your picking up the check that sooner or later will be handed to me?"

"On the other hand," said George, "talking about jobs—I can recall the days when a friend of mine was dying for a job, and would, in fact, have given anything for a job, and couldn't possibly keep one even when he had it."

"I said, George—Are you munificent to the extent of your picking up—"

"Why do you insist on interrupting me with aimless chatter when I'm trying to tell you the story of Vainamoinen Glitz?"

George always knows how to stop me cold. "Vainamoinen!" I said. "What kind of name is Vainamoinen? You haven't the faintest idea who Vainamoinen was!"

"Of course I do. I've just told you. He was my friend, Vainamoinen Glitz. Everyone called him Van."

"But that's ridiculous. There's not a person outside Finland who could possibly be called Vainamoinen. Vainamoinen is the Finnish mythic hero; a musician; a magician; a demigod—"

"My Vainamoinen was just a pleasant sort of nebbish, very good-looking the young ladies seemed to think, and as rich as the day was long. Actually, he was Vainamoinen Glitz III."

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"You mean his father and grandfather—"

"Yes, that's the assumption. Maybe he had a faint trace of Choctaw blood in him. I think Vainamoinen is a Choctaw word meaning 'brave warrior.' But, talking about Finnish, can we finish with this thing you seem to have over an ordinary Choctaw name, or Chickasaw, and let me go on with the story."

I shrugged.

I see that you are eager [said George] so let me plunge into the story without any further ado.

I had known Van's father well (his name being Vainamoinen Glitz, Jr.) and I had watched with pleasure as Van grew older. He had the pleasant upbringing of a young man in comfortable circumstances, since his father, having had the newsstand concession at the Pentagon, was naturally a multimillionaire.

Van was a daring young fellow, too, for I'll never forget his disappointment at having the Vietnam War end just before he reached draftable age. He was looking forward with such excitement to entering the National Guard.

But it was not to be. He served his country, instead, by inspecting the various resort areas of our great nation, returning to the city every once in a while, for as he said, "All that lounging about is hard work, George, and it's nice to get back to the occasional dinner with you."

Things might have gone very well with him, for he was becoming one of the nation's leading experts on beaches, nightclubs, theaters, and other important business establishments, and then he met Dulcinea Greenwich. Now don't start gasping over the first name, old man. She told me that her father had once read a book called *Don Quixote*, but I think she was making that up, because you know and I know that no one would ever write a book with a silly name like that. It wouldn't sell.

Van came to me all of a twitter. "George," he said, "I have met the most wonderful woman in all the world. She is dynamic. She is strong. She is intelligent."

"Intelligent?" I said. I had seen him through a dozen mild love affairs and it had never seemed to me that his criterion for feminine excellence had been intelligence.

"Well," he said, simpering, "she says she's madly in love with me and if that's not a sign of intelligence, George, what is?"

"Van," I said, "when someone is as good-looking as you are, and as filthy rich, what's not to love? That's not a sign of intelligence, that's just a sign that she's not dead."

"No," said Van, "she's not that kind of young woman and I think that cynicism does not become you. It so happens that the other young women

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who seemed to me to be attracted to my charm and insouciance all wanted to marry me and achieve large settlements and double indemnity insurance policies. Remember?"

"I remember."

"Well, Dulcinea doesn't want anything."

"Not *anything?*" I viewed that statement with the deepest suspicion.

"Well, one thing."

"Aha."

"It's not what you think. She wants me to get a job."

I won't deny the fact, old man, that I swallowed the wrong way when he said that and it took me some time before I could convince myself I wasn't going to choke to death. Finally, everything stopped swimming before my eyes and I said in a ghastly whisper, "A *job?* Why does she want you to have a job?"

"She thinks," said Van moodily, "that it will make a man of me."

"But you *are* a man. You are even," I said with a sense of awe, for I have always been impressed by those with the talent and cleverness to be born rich, "a wealthy man, and if anything defines a man more securely than pelf, lucre, and a thick wallet, I would like to know what it is."

(I feel strongly about such things, old man, for though my circumstances have cast me into a certain shadow of poverty, I have the heart and soul of as rich a man as any in these United States.)

"She says," said Van, "that I am charming and that she loves me dearly, but I'm an idle wastrel."

"Idle wastrel? With all the work you've been doing on the beaches and resorts?"

"For some reason, she won't count that. She wants me to have a nine to five job, however humble, and to hold it for no less than six weeks, thus proving myself to be a go-getter—to use her phrase."

"She must be sick."

"No, George. She is not. She is a creature of high ideals and she has my heart. I will simply get a job and show her that I can go-get as well as any go-getter in the world."

"What kind of a job are you thinking of, Van?"

Van shook his head. "There you have me, George. I have not been trained or educated for anything and I can only hope that some prospective employer will be satisfied with the fact that I know very little—Even nothing." He smiled bravely, "I am, of course, an expert and certified beach inspector. Perhaps that will help. Good-bye, George, I'm off to the barricades."

Poor Van. What followed thereafter was pitiful. Pitiful! If I were to

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give it to you in detail, old man, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy—

(Please don't recite along with me. Has someone been stealing my lines again?—Hamlet's father? Never heard of him.)

In any case, he didn't make it. I didn't follow his case closely, of course, for I am a busy man with a million things to do constantly. The racing form alone—But I digress.

Occasionally, he would invite me to dinner and it was plain that he was sinking under the strain. His tan was fading and he admitted that his polo game was quite off. "When I tell you, George," he said, in a husky whisper, "that in the last month I have fallen off my polo pony twice you will know what I mean. Please don't let it get round."

"But it must get round. Surely the other players would have noticed that you fell off?"

"Polo players never talk about such things, George. It's the code of the pony."

The problem was that infernal matter of a job, of course. He had tried everything, he said. He had obtained a job as champagne-taster at his favorite nightclub, got drunk the first night and insulted the boss. He was evicted with extreme prejudice. He offered to show me where he was kicked but I was not interested in the sight.

He got a job as a cashier, but couldn't figure out how to work the register. And he said all those numbers made him numb, which (he thinks) is why they're called numbers. He got a job at a gasoline pump but never figured out how to get the gascap off the tank. He got a job at the information desk at Bloomingdales, but quit after one hour in a dudgeon because it seemed the customers expected him to have information. Need I go on?

"It seems," said Van, "that I will never have the girl of my dreams. My life, George," he went on, "will be empty and void of meaning. Inspecting beaches will have no allure. Trying out a new nightclub will result in but hollow gaiety. Of what use is it if I plumb the heights of idle wastreldom, if I lose the woman to whom my soul is indissolubly bound?" And here he wept into his champagne, diluting it in the most appalling fashion.

My heart ached for him, old man. It seemed to me that if he retired into a life of moroseness and sorrow, he would be far less likely to stand me the occasional meal. True altruism, as you know very well, begins at home, so I would have to do something for him.

That meant Azazel.—Have I ever told you about my two-centimeter alien whom I can call upon by means of arcane methods known only to myself?

I have?—Surely you jest.

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But be that as it may, I called upon Azazel.

Azazel, as you might have expected, was furious. He arrived still shrieking in his counter-soprano and waving his arms madly. Then he looked about, spied me, and said, "You idiot of a grobbledug, is this a time to call me?"

"It is a time I need you, oh, Marvel of the Universe."

"But I was watching—" He went on to describe the matter in tedious detail. There are apparently beasts on his world with six legs who proceed by leaps and somersaults in random directions and a great deal of money is placed on their progress. The first one to blunder across a finish line wins. Azazel insisted that his steed, whose name was unpronounceable, was on the point of winning.

"If I don't get back to the exact instant at which I left," he screamed, "I will lose seventy dworshaks."

"Of course you will get back to the exact instant. What I am going to ask of you is simplicity itself and will take you only another instant, O Champion of the Cosmos." (He loves being addressed in that fulsome fashion for he is a little creature and on his home planet he is usually referred to with the utmost contempt, I gather.)

I explained the situation. "A job?" he said, "On my world, we have the word 'klastron' by which we refer to any demeaning task that must be performed by people of low social status over their objections and against their will."

"Yes," I said, feelingly, "that's what we mean by a 'job.' "

"Poor fellow," said Azazel, dripping a tiny tear that fell upon the table cloth and burnt a tiny hole in it. "And he actually wants one?"

"He needs one if he is to have the girl of his dreams, the woman to whom his soul is indissolubly bound."

"Ah, love, love," said Azazel, dripping another tiny tear, "to what extremities it takes even the wisest being. I remember once, when for the love of a dear zapulnik—who was six feet tall, which created a problem, I can tell you—I challenged her middle-mate to a—But that is neither here nor there. I take it you want me to arrange to have him find a job that he can keep."

"That is right."

"And he has no qualifications?"

"None."

"Then we must work purely emotionally. We must arrange to have an employer who will be perpetually satisfied with this friend of yours, and arrange further to have your friend perpetually satisfied with his job. An intricate affair."

"Not too intricate for the Unpuzzler of the Pulsars."

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"No, of course not," said Azazel doubtfully, "and yet this has its difficult points. Since we don't know who the employer might be, I will have to arrange a general field of acquiescence and that's not easy."

I must say, old man, that this was one time when I seemed to lack faith in Azazel. He took a long time, mumbled a great deal, and, although I cannot tell what it is he does when he is engaged in the advanced technology of his own society, it did *seem* to me that he was backing and filling, with much shaking of the head and the making of new starts.

When he finally heaved a tremulous sigh and said, "It is done," he said it in a tone of voice that filled me with doubt. I thanked him effusively, of course, but I didn't entirely believe he had done it.

I blame myself for this, old man. It was my doubt that led to disaster.—No, I am not about to drip a tiny tear into my champagne. And this is not champagne, I might as well remind you. It is cheap white wine.

I put a lot of thought into it, old man. It seemed to me that Azazel was a broken reed and that, besides, I didn't want to see Van get a job. I admit jobs have to be done, but surely not by myself or those I consider my friends and loved ones. So I had an idea.

I sought Van out at his club. "Van," I said, "I have never met this Dulcinea of yours and I would like to."

He looked at me with what I can only describe as an ugly suspicion. "She is too young for you," he said.

"Van," I said, "you wrong me. Women are entirely safe with me. They may beg and they may offer money, as they frequently do, but except out of pure kindness and a view to ameliorating their suffering I assure you I would have nothing to do with them."

My earnestness and my transparent honesty had their effect. "Well, well," he said. "I will introduce you."

He did, eventually, and I got to know her. She was a rather small girl, thin, beautiful figure, dark hair. She had dark eyes that were very keen. She moved quickly and had an air of suppressed energy about her at all times. She was, in fact, quite the opposite of Van, for Van was easy-going and allowed life to drift casually past him. Dulcinea, on the other hand, gave me the definite impression that she seized life by the throat, shook it, and threw it in the direction she wanted it to go.

Frankly, I have never had the impulse to marry, but had I—if one can imagine so ludicrous a possibility—it would never have been Dulcinea. Being near her was like standing too close to a crackling bonfire—it made one uncomfortably warm. Of course, opposites attract and I was perfectly willing to let Van marry Dulcinea. It would after all remove her from circulation and make it more comfortable for other males she might meet.

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"I have longed to meet you, Miss Greenwich," I said, in my most courtly manner, pronouncing it Gren'ij as any civilized person would do.

"It's pronounced Green'wich, and you can call me Dulcie. I take it you are George, a friend Van has told me much of." She gave me an appraising look that seemed to skin me.

"A close friend," I said.

She harumphed, then said, "Well, after he manages this job-thing, I'll be able to get on to other matters. I'll have to, obviously."

I'll tell you frankly I didn't like her tone, but I said, "It is about the job-thing that I wish to talk to you. Why on Earth do you want Van to have a job?"

"Because it is not good for a man to be a gadabout, and to waste his life on trivialities."

"For a *man?*" I said. "Not for a woman?"

She blinked a few times. "A woman should be up and at 'em, also."

"Shouldn't one of a couple be taking care of the house while the other is out there in the jungle?"

"Blatant male chauvinist propaganda."

"Nonsense! I said 'one of a couple.' I didn't specify. It's whichever is best suited for whichever job. I take it you are a feminist."

"Absolutely. I come from a long line of feminists. One of my ancestresses busted General Ambrose Burnside in the snoot for having the nerve to wink at her. She messed up his sideburns, I can tell you."

"Exactly. Then it strikes me that you are far more capable of handling yourself in this cruel world of ours than poor Van is. Van is a soft and gentle human being—"

"Yes, he is," and her voice softened a bit and a look of what was almost human feeling came into her eyes. "He's my little lambsie-pie."

I controlled the shudder and went on smoothly, "Where you are as hard as nails."

"Hard as drop-forged alloy steel, I've always thought."

"Then shouldn't *you* be the one who gets the job?"

"Hmm," she said.

"In fact," I said. "I think you ought to go into politics. We need a hard-hitting, hard-headed, hard-fisted, hard-shelled American telling all those shifty swivel-heads what to do."

"Hmm," she said.

"And if you go into politics, what can you better have than a rich husband who can supply the money for all those TV shots? Not that it would be lost money, for once you are elected you will find a thousand ways of earning the money back; some of them nearly ethical."

"Hmm," she said.

"And Van is just the type of mate a politician would need—at the left,

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one step back. Smiling for the camera, charming the elderly female vote, looking up at you adoringly as you make your speeches. The last thing you would want is to have him take a job. He'll need to use all his time to take up some good cause that will make you look good—like homes for aged polo ponies, where he can teach them all to 'Just say neigh.' "

"Hmm," she said. "There's a great deal in what you say."

"There usually is," I admitted.

"Let me think about it."

"Certainly, but act quickly. Otherwise, Van may get a job and it may spoil him for the exacting task of being First Gentleman."

"First Gentleman." She rolled the phrase over her tongue, then she murmured, "Madam President"—and said, energetically, "I'll see him tonight."

And so she did, and the results were as I had foreseen.

Van phoned me the next day in the greatest excitement. "George," he said, "Dulcinea wishes to marry me. I am not in the least required to get one of those nine-to-five jobs. She says I will certainly have plenty to do when I marry her and she can no longer wait to have her heart's desire fulfilled.—You see, she means me, when she speaks of her heart's desire, of course."

"Undoubtedly," I said. To be sure, it might have been the White House, but I saw no reason to mention that to Van at this happy time in his life.

He was married in less than a month. I was one of the Gentlemen Ushers, and the champagne was superb. When I tell you that I even managed to avoid kissing the bride, you will understand that it was an occasion on which the heavens themselves smiled.

The happy couple went off on a honeymoon, and they then retired to their suburban mansion.

They kept themselves busy, for Dulcinea Glitz, as she now was, did enter politics. I don't know how closely you follow politics, old man, sitting there, as you do, with your nose in your word processor at all times, but in just a few years she blazed her way through the city council, and is now running for the state senate.

I must tell you that I was very proud of myself. For once, I had not depended on Azazel but had done it all myself, and very neatly, too, you will have to admit. It was clear to me that, in this one case, Azazel had failed. There was no strange emotional force-field that lured employers into demanding Van's services; no wild yearning for menial position on Van's part. No, he and his loved one simply got married.

All was well.

At least, I thought all was well until I met Van a month or so ago. He

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had aged considerably. His tan was gone; his hands trembled a little; he walked with a slight stoop; and there was a haunted look in his eyes.

I ignored it all, and said heartily, "Van! Long time no see!"

He turned to look at me and it seemed to take him a while to recognize me. "Is that you, George?"

"None other."

"How are you, George? Meeting you is such delicious pain. It reminds me of the old days; days that are never more to be, alas." And tears coursed down his cheeks.

I was taken aback. "Van!" I said. "What is the matter, old chap? Don't tell me she made you get a job after all!"

"No, no," he said. "Would that she had. I am busy in other ways. I must consult the head gardeners on the matter of the grounds and gardens, busy myself with the cook in preparing menus, go into a huddle with the housekeeper on the parties we must constantly give, hire nursemaids for the twins that dear Dulcie took two days off to have. In general, the work is very, very demanding, but on top of that—"

"Yes?"

"On top of that, she is in politics, you know. Someone apparently suggested it to her once. Blithering, interfering idiot," he said peevishly. "If I could find him, I'd hit him over the noggin with my polo mallet. After all, I have no other use for it these days. You wouldn't know who suggested it, would you, George?"

I said, "I think it must have been her own idea. I can't conceive that anyone would be so foolish as to suggest it to her.—But tell me, what's wrong with her having entered politics?"

"What's wrong? It deprives me of all my individuality. I am constantly being asked by interviewers the extent to which I influence her decisions, whether I actually get to sleep with her, whether it's true that I consult an astrologer to get the proper time for her to make her speeches? I tell you, George, I have no life of my own anymore. Nobody even knows my first name, and why should they? Do you know Mr. Margaret Thatcher's first name? Of course not. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it."

My heart was wrung. "Have you told her this, Van?"

"Frequently. But she says that I am the ideal politician's mate and that someday when she retires from her second term as President, I will be able to visit the beaches and nightclubs again."

"I hate to say this, Van, but have you considered a divorce? She's a politician who can't stand scandal, so she's sure to let you go quietly and probably even let you retain custody of the children. Then you'll be a free man again."

Van nodded his head and said sadly. "I have often thought of this. I

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would even allow *her* to retain custody of the rotten—of the precious tykes of ours. But I can't, George, I can't."

"Why can't you? I'm sure she'd make no trouble."

"It's not she, George, it's I—I—I—I." He pounded himself on his chest with each "I" till a fit of coughing stopped him.

When he had recovered, he said, "This marriage I view as a job. From the moment Dulcinea and I stood before the minister I thought to myself exultantly, 'This is a job—the job I swore to my Dulcinea I would get and keep.' In fact, I have the feeling that I must *never* give up this job, no matter what, and Dulcinea feels the same. I don't know why. It is a kind of mystical thing. And so you see, I'll never be free. Never."

So there you are. You see the mistake. Azazel's workings *did* do the job. And when I interfered—with the very best motives in the world, I assure you—I arranged a marriage which, under the circumstances, turned out to be the job neither he nor Dulcinea could end, and which he, at least, couldn't bear. It's too bad, but it's just a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth, to coin a phrase.

I shook my head sadly. "You seem to spoil the broth every time, George. What is it with you?—But in any case, as long as you're on the road to prosperity, would you take care of the tip, at least?"

George looked revolted. "When I have just told you a sad story, a terrible tragedy—is that the time when you should be discussing anything as sordid as money?"

He was right, of course, so I lumped the tip in with the rest of the check and paid it. Then I handed him five dollars to show that I was sorry I had hurt his feelings.

Habit is a hard thing to break. It would be very hard for me to stop giving money to George, and much harder STILL for George to stop accepting it.●

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CRUISING THROUGH BLUELAND

by Robert Frazier

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In the dry season of a feverish year, when the earth baked throughout the Brazilian Shield, Jeri Cristobel sensed a change of climate, and, like any gold miner who lived on rations of fear and superstition, he assumed that with it would come a personal tragedy.

It seemed impossible to shrug off the smell of impending rain as he shouldered his dirt bags out of the pit to the placer troughs on the rim above. He rested atop one of the boxlike plots, each of them busy with Serra Pelada's workers. Taking extra care, he climbed the tall ladders that clung against the walls like vines from the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and, as he climbed, he made comparisons between the pride and sin and avarice of that biblical city and life at the mine, although Serra Pelada was devoid of petty details like vegetation or carved stone. Just dirt and men. It reminded Jeri of a movie scene in which army ants had stripped a vat of beet sugar. The key element was motion. . . .the dirt was shoveled into sacks, which in turn shifted to men's backs, which themselves moved up and down the crudely lashed ladders like beads on an abacus rack. Since the plots were so small, with their digging levels uneven, miners in the deepest recesses needed to move their loads in elaborate patterns that altered each day. The walls resembled a map of writhing flesh. And at dusk on Saturday, all of it turned an eerie blood-red as Jeri quit work for the week.

It was pitch dark when Skaff Rios found Jeri nursing a warm glass of rum in town at the Plaza of Lies. After introductions, they discussed the quick onset of the rainy season and speculated if it, indeed, were an omen. Then the man produced a letter with news of the sickness that gripped Jeri's brother. Jeri's apprehensions found an immediate focus. He made his decision to return home, and notified the administrators that he was abondoning his plot deep in the pit, which, as several friends had pointed out, would soon be submerged by torrential downpours anyway. He packed what mattered to him in a single duffle, and squeezed it and his long limbs into Skaff's rusty, antique CJ-7.

Skaff looked soft under his blue suit, a man with manicured nails and scented oil on his jet-black hair, the physical opposite of Jeri, who had turned gaunt and deeply tanned in the mine pit, worry lines grooving his face. At first Skaff drove in resolute silence, stoically enduring two days of violent showers and roach hotels, but eventually he grew talkative, and rambled on expansively about his adventures as a drug smuggler. The big scores and expensive whores. His investments. His bribes to Blueboy soldiers in San Juan de Caceres. Jeri considered Skaff useful for entering Caceres, now capital of the restricted zone of wargames called Blueland, so he feigned interest in such talk. In his head, though, another voice mourned for the close fraternal ties his true brothers had shared, ties that the Blueboys had shattered. This infused his replies

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with bitterness. By the time they passed into the new affluence of the Mato Grosso, Jeri felt as weak as a man twice his age, yet he sensed that the grueling ride had had less impact on him than the inescapable conclusion that people like Skaff *preferred* their lives to be ruled by a single elemental value like greed.

Had he done any better by leaving Caceres for the gold mines? He liked to think so, liked to think that the support he'd paid for his brother Eric kept the scales in balance.

The wet weather cleared on the third evening of travel, yet strips of cloud sailed across the moon and divided its light into swatches of silver and lagoons of shadow that threatened to swallow the jeep, to offer as dark a resolution to the journey south as the one Jeri feared awaited him at its end. Then the jeep did drop axle-deep into a mudhole. Skaff swore, wrenching the wheel to avoid the deep center. Jeri's gut fluttered with nausea. Hurled against his door, gulping for air, he almost regretted his acceptance of Skaff's ride from the passive hell of the mines to the aggressive living horrors of Blueland.

Eric Cristobel slept spread-eagled in an underground level of the Jiboa Hotel, pinioned to his bare mattress, underwear soaked and sheets balled on the wooden floor beside him. Sweat beaded under his dark bangs. He flowed in and out of consciousness like a wave breaking, then receding on a ghostly shore, and, though he tried to raise himself up, his movements were sluggish, ineffective. He tried again and managed to jerk upright, contracting his stomach to get his torso sitting straight.

He felt like shit.

He wanted to imagine something beautiful, someone uplifting. He wondered where his brother Jeri lived, what exotic lands he'd traveled to. But none of that mattered, not really.

It felt like he was still dreaming, and he did not believe that he would ever awaken.

The road smoothed out along a recently logged ridge, and Jeri could see flashes fifty kilometers to the south. He shuddered as he pointed at the storm gathering there.

"That's malo," he yelled to Skaff over the whine of the engine. "A mean squall."

It looked to Jeri as if he'd plunged his hand into the barrel of an immense artillery piece, where the thunderheads, held to a horizontal axis by strange meteorological forces, formed a corkscrew spiral, and lightning danced through its dark eye like threads of current jumping inside a supercharged coil.

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"Yeah. I bet it's close to the city," Skaff said.

Jeri grunted in reply. He stared at the blue forks of light and wondered how he could have left his brother there. Blueland, a place where weapons like these were tested.

A stiff wind gusted through the jeep. Skaff waved a fleshy fist at the storm and beat the dashboard to a tune that crackled on the radio. The samba was loud and plaintive, and it seemed to Jeri that it was the music that tossed Skaff's greasy black curls and lashed them about his jowls and sunken eyes. Huge rain drops drummed on the windshield, leaked from the roof. They rolled their windows up, and Jeri arranged his poncho around the neck of his shirt and under his chinos until it covered all but his face. As Skaff maneuvered on the rutted highway, the headlights stabbed high and low through the roadside homesteads and shadowy tunnels in the forest ahead, like the brush strokes of a painter filling in a dark canvas. Billowing clouds obscured a pewter grey moon. The blue lightning flashed brighter.

"It's the Blueboys," Jeri said after a few more kilometers. "Playing, for the hell of it. I've seen them tie tornadoes in knots."

Skaff nodded, but Jeri knew that he was still intent on the radio and didn't see what Jeri saw when they looked into the tempest. Skaff concerned himself with the high life, with running drugs into Blueland. He hadn't been born there. Skaff's older brother hadn't been pancaked under a building when the Blueboys caused *heavy rain*—precipitant sheets made heavy with isotopes. And his younger brother wasn't trapped in Caceres now, confined to a sickbed. Jeri wondered what he would think of Eric, how Skaff would react to such a destitute soul.

"Fucking Blueboys." Jeri spat with vehemence. "Caceres was beautiful until they came."

Jeri imagined packets of Skaff's drugs strapped somewhere under the jeep, and this paranoia heightened his agitation, as if the coke radiated homing signals that could attract every Blueboy in the territory. He swallowed hard. When the jeep hit a series of deep potholes, he grasped the armrest until his knuckles whitened.

"Yeah, places like Caceres go sour." Skaff rolled his window down as the rain abated some; he brushed the water off his suitcoat. "Damn this mugginess. Makes your balls cook."

He turned to Jeri with a toothy grin, but Jeri refused to smile back. Just nodded and pulled at his new growth of beard.

"Yup," Skaff continued. "I'm hot, and I'm almost home to Carlita!" He grabbed his crotch and let out a sarcastic laugh that drowned in a sudden riff of static from the radio.

As they exited from a funnel of trees onto another open stretch of hilltop, the jeep spooked a menagerie of birds that flapped about the

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windshield and winked in and out of the headlights. Jeri recognized none of the species. A pterodactyllike flyer lifted above them. Skaff braked and came to a bone-jolting halt. Meters from the steaming grill of the jeep stood the biggest wolf Jeri had ever seen, an Amazonian maned wolf of incredible proportions. Two more wolves loped up beside the first and held their ground in the bright beams of the headlights, pawing the dirt. They stood taller than draft horses, with bat ears, madder-colored hair bristling in a collar of fire about their heads. They inched forward, their long tapered noses to the ground, their night-reflective eyes flashing golden as coins.

Skaff babbled and gunned the accelerator, but the engine cut out. In the pale halflight from the dashboard, Jeri saw a blue arm as it snaked away from the steering column. He looked past Skaff's profile, glimpsed the face of a Blueboy in a combat suit and a visorless helmet molded like brain coral. The wolves vanished, holographic projections that melted to fog. The trooper held up Skaff's keys.

"Real glad ya stopped by," the Blueboy said. His voice sounded no louder than a whisper, yet its coarse English sonics seemed to worm their way inside Jeri's brain. "Leave yer lights on. We'll be needin' to see papers on yer business in the region."

Skaff reached for the wallet in his coat, but, aware that the Blueboys might take undue liberties in their inspection if they remained passively inside, Jeri opened his door and stepped down to the mud road on wobbly legs.

"We live here," he said, but could say no more.

The trooper moved to the passenger side of the jeep with impossible speed, and seized Jeri under the chin, pinning him against the hood. Jeri began to struggle, then thought better of it when the Blueboy applied a crushing, vicelike pressure. He slid his hand behind him, hoping to reach his own ID card, but the trooper interpreted this as a hostile move and lifted him off his feet, banging his head hard against the windshield. Jeri felt a ridge of coarse, synthetic skin cut off his wind pipe.

"Stop it," Jeri gasped.

"Ya ain't in no position to tell *me* nothin'. Some rebel's been takin' shots at us, and we'd just as soon torch this junker. Watch ya boil like crawdaddies."

"Listen here!" Skaff said from inside the cab.

"Oh, I am listening. And I don't like what I hear. Ya took the wrong road tonight, boys."

"Got trouble, Trigger?" The new voice spoke with a smoother North American accent. "If not, then ease up."

The trooper released him, and Jeri slipped off the hood to his knees in a puddle. He coughed and rubbed at his chafed neck. His stomach

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spasmed, and he tasted bile, imagining it to be an emotion he'd built up over the years from this kind of treatment.

"Who is this?" asked the voice.

Jeri said, as he stood, "I wasn't allowed to show my . . ."

The soldier throttled him again. "Ya don't talk to General Berkey unless *spoken* to."

"Trigger, let him loose."

General Berkey stepped from the shadows behind Trigger and covered the distance to them in two power-augmented strides. She was dressed in light battle armor with an officer's pentagram insignia, and she smiled, revealing a mouthful of shark's teeth inlaid in gold settings. Her lapis exoskin failed to mask the delicate structure of her face. A dragon tattoo twined from her bare scalp around one eye. She reached out her empty hand. Baffled, Jeri stared at the burn scars that trailed along the lengths of her graceful fingers. Plastic nails retracted under flexible exoskin cuticles and left their hollow points showing. Instead of a thumbnail, a tiny video screen held a view of Skaff's jeep from a camera above and beside them. She cleared her throat. Jeri understood then, and handed her his wallet.

The Blueboy leader flashed him a quizzical look when she read his ID, then strode off, punching numbers on a row of pinpoint keys below the screen on her thumb. She returned after a few minutes of consultation, her face changed, as if to say, "I know who you are, Mr. Cristobel."

Eric awoke from yet another nap, his eyes fixed on the wall beyond the end of his bed.

Wallpaper began to breathe, to melt, its patterns of hibiscus flowers fusing into a large reddish blotch about five feet off the floor. Something pushed through the center of the blotch, and the wall stretched out taut and rubbery over the knobby protrusion. At first it appeared smooth, without detail, but the more Eric stared at the knob, the more it resembled a fist with four parallel fingers meeting at a bony row of knuckles. And as his full attention centered on this, a blue hand punched through the red stain and groped for the end of the mattress.

Eric held his breath. His lungs cried for air.

A muscular blue arm followed, covered with turquoise blood, and it grasped at the ragged edges of its entry hole. Began to tear the hole bigger. A dark shoulder and a portion of ebony chest pushed further into Eric's room. Eric rolled from bed. Bolted out the door and into the dim hallway.

Shadows along the baseboards pooled into phantasms that lashed at his feet. Eric ran for the stairs. A bright yellow missile flashed through the wall on his right and passed into the wall on his left without leaving

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a mark on either surface, yet he could smell the acrid fumes of exhaust as it passed. Sirens wailed inside his head. He pitched forward on the green shag runner before the stairs, landing hard, his head smacking against the padding on the fifth riser. He stared at the pebbled grain of the carpet just inches before his eyes. A window suddenly opened into the riser, a window that looked down on a swirling city of spires and slums. The window moved, as if Eric were seated in a hoverchop skimming over the skyscrapers, and when he dipped down over low buildings, the familiar peeling white manse of the Jiboa Hotel ballooned below him on the street. Several Blueboys were breaking into the front lobby, weapons ready. He could hear the grunted commands and the thud of heavy boots on the staircase.

His viewpoint trailed them through a hallway, gliding over their heads. He searched frantically for a safe place to hide from the chaos and pain that would come. Entered a dark rectangle, lit by a feeble bulb above the upper jamb. Plunged down several flights of stairs. Fell smack on a prostrate body, sinking into it, deep into the recesses of the brain.

"Hey, this looks like the one!"

The voice was deep and resonant; it surrounded Eric where he lay on the steps. Someone nudged him with a boot, then kicked him. He tumbled back in a heap at the foot of the stairs.

"He must have heard us rounding up people on the upper levels and knocked himself unconscious trying to get out."

"Get Dirk to run a retinal scan. We need positive ID."

More gruff voices. Thick hands grabbed Eric under the armpits and jerked him up until he stood, feeling exposed in briefs and a stained teeshirt. He was spun around to face his tormentors. Men laughed as they shined a pencil beam in his eye. They had wide blue faces, and mouths filled with wicked teeth and black gums. Another soldier arrived from upstairs.

"Hurry up with the scan," the new one said. "I've got to confirm the capture over the comm."

"Shee-it. Isn't this the same kid we picked up last week? What gives?"

"Popular boy. The General wants him out at Delta Base by dawn. They're reeling him in."

Men on each side of Eric boosted him onto the first step as if he were a feather. Pushed and prodded him until he started the awkward climb to ground level. Progress was slow. Projections and drug mists left his body twitching.

"Should we sedate him?"

"Why bother? He's already gone."

General Berkey returned with Jeri's ID.

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"All in order, Jeraldo. They're old but quite valid. I'm intrigued by your history." Berkey said this with a sensuous curl of her tongue along the ridges of her teeth. "My apologies for the men. They're upset over an earlier incident."

"So I gathered."

She called to Trigger, who stood at the back of the vehicle poking a tire iron into the wheelwell for the spare tire. "What about the driver?"

Trigger closed the well, then zipped up Skaff's bags and crammed Jeri's duffle on top of them. They were soaked with mud.

"He checks out, sir."

"You two can go," the General said as the rain quickened, beading on her cheeks and dropping little jewels from the tip of her nose.

She handed Jeri his ID and his wallet, and her touch traced a mild stinging shock on the back of his hand. It dissipated along his forearm and burned from the shoulder down his chest to warm his groin, as if he'd swallowed a mug of grain alcohol. His immediate erection strained against the fabric of his pants. Acids flared in his gut. He felt soiled. She'd juiced him with an E-pheromone, a tailored and often addictive drug that imprinted its victim for future susceptibility, a sexually specific susceptibility. Jeri opened the jeep door and collapsed in his seat as Skaff eased his foot off the clutch. He could still feel the heat of her caress and her glistening pupils scanning him, as if the topography of his soul winked on a computer screen, revealing his weakness for mysterious women.

Skaff sped up. Jeri let the door flap open, let the drizzle pepper his face with cold bullets.

"Christ, that was close!" Skaff said loudly. "I've got a load of coca paste in that spare."

As if to place emphasis on Skaff's relief, a powerful wind sighed through the cracks in Skaff's door. Skaff's emotional tone was clear to Jeri, however. It wasn't just worry. It was raw fear. A wild look shined in the man's eyes each time lightning crackled and spit in the sky ahead of them. Indeed, Skaff was a newcomer to the ways of Blueboy troopers and their games, and they'd gotten to him. Jeri caught his swinging door and slammed it shut just as thunder boomed overhead. He huddled under his poncho again.

"It was closer than you think," he said as Skaff slowed. "I'm not sure why, but my papers got us through with a minimal search."

Skaff didn't ask for clarification; he chewed gum and concentrated on the road. Ruts and potholes were overflowing with rain. The spatter soaked Jeri's ankle boots through a missing plate in the floor of the cab, and, when the downpour came, it fluttered the canvas roof and slapped the windshield in sidewinding sheets that tongued along the glass

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around the frantic wipers. Jeri's stomach grew queasy again, its juices frothing and tossing like the leafy branches overhanging the road. He curled against the wet seat and closed his eyes. The jeep moved like a frigate cutting between the crests of tall, black waves. When Jeri nodded off, the present seemed light years away, a slip of coast in the foggy distance, while the past loomed in his thoughts like a steep rocky island.

He was born Jeraldo Cristobel, one of three brothers orphaned without birthplace or date. The three were settled in St. Sambuca, a drafty stone church with a small walled enclosure in the back, where the cottage lipped the private bathing pond of an aging Father Superior rumored to have a taste for young boys. When all three had reached schooling age, Eric—whose sensitive mind could perform small miracles—was raped by this man. At the urging of his oldest brother Jerico, he snuck off with them to a nearby river and called into their bucket a swarm of candiru for the Father's pond. The sliver-sized fish were called "piss fish" by the swamp fishermen, who had to squeeze themselves off while they bathed or face castration when the tiny devils lodged themselves in the urethra. The Father Superior fared no better, and the boys' revenge welded them into a tight-knit unit—protective of each other—as they found themselves back on the streets of Caceres. A young hotel owner named Mama Lavao took them in, and Jeri, at age nine, buried himself in a routine of hard work and solid food. Though he mistrusted Mama's charity at first, Jeri grew content as the years passed, his muscles grew hard, and his smouldering eyes attracted many local girls.

When Jeri turned fourteen, the elite soldiers of the WestHem armies occupied the surrounding countryside for a full winter, a season of rain and mock violence. Each year thereafter, the Blueboys stayed longer, staging ever more elaborate battles and tests, until the fateful event that stayed branded in Jeri's memory, when a Blueboy weapon test went wrong, flattening an entire neighborhood, and taking Jerico with it. Eric retreated to his own fantasia of grief and self-pity. Jeri escaped this fate by leaving Caceres at twenty for São Paolo. Now he was giving up that freedom. Now he was coming *back* . . .

By the time they reached the far edge of the Mato Grosso planalto, Jeri felt better, although he was still feverish from the drug. He sat up and watched the sunlight leak over the hills and turn the foliage a faint silver. The jungle developed like a photographic plate: first the imperceptible brightening, then a breakdown of solid shadow into visible forms, then the emergence of the grainy details. The newly risen sun torched the fine spiderwebbing of cracks in their windshield and overexposed the vegetation they passed to a molten riot of yellows and parrot

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greens. At last, it cleared the horizon.

Complaining of stiffness and exhaustion, Skaff pulled over onto a wide shoulder where the road snaked off the heights to the city, which hugged the foot of the hillside and the very edge of the valley below. They sat, hypnotized by the Pantanal where it stretched southeast into the distance like a glittering plain of light, pocked with islands and great weedy domains. Only the Gran Chaco stood wholly aloof from the floodwaters. It ran to the west, a low, sparsely-wooded climax forest that swallowed eastern Bolivia and half of Paraguay.

"See, it's beautiful country," Skaff said to Jeri.

"Sure, but it doesn't resemble any place that WestHem would be defending against EastHem. The soldiers don't need to come here for training."

"They have to train somewhere."

"In the North American cities, if they must. But invasion there seems just as unlikely. The West has conceded Europe and Africa for Latin America and the Pacific Islands. The world's split fairly."

"Doesn't matter," Skaff said. "Armies are armies."

After they watched a pair of rudderless, cigar-shaped gunships—termed "hoverchops" by the Blueboys—glide silently past them and dip over the checkerboard of Caceres below, Jeri lit a cigarette and began to talk again, not willing to let the subject drop.

"Want to hear something weird?" he said.

"Yeah." Skaff popped a second stick of gum into his cheek.

"My friend, The Impresario, said in the letter you delivered that Eric had a theory. Something about a mass psychological experiment being used on the city this year. Funny, eh?"

Skaff said, "Like we're mice in a maze."

Jeri coughed and flicked his ashes out the vent window. Then he rolled his main window down for air.

"More like lab rats."

"I didn't know your brother was an intellectual."

"He isn't. That's his delirium speaking. But it could be true. He has a knack for knowing things. I've seen him guess names. Seen him call fish and caimans up from the swampy waters."

Skaff snorted in disbelief.

Jeri knew, though. He and his brothers had been monitored in their teens by Blueboy scientists, and Eric, at least, possessed a talent, an eerie potential they wanted to groom. Also, Jeri knew first hand about the neural disruptions: the drug mists, the subliminal fear waves, and the projected images that the soldiers used. The disruptions had dredged up strange things from his soul, until he couldn't stand it anymore. Had to flee. But Eric had stuck it out. Suddenly the guilt swelled in Jeri's

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heart. The same old guilt. *He'd* escaped, but left Eric to fend for himself.

Jeri grew anxious to see his brother. He stubbed his cigarette on his boot heel and dropped the half-finished butt through the gap in the jeep's floor board. He wondered if Skaff had ever jettisoned contraband through that hole.

"Let's get going," he said.

Skaff turned the ignition over. They bounced onto the road and slipped down the windy bends to the city and the immense swamplands that bordered it. On the last curve that straightened out into the wide basin, they skirted the Caceres airbase, with its small spacepad that served a fledgling colony on Mars; from here—it had been rumored—Jeri's father Paulo had emigrated after deserting their mother, leaving her in the grip of the Chagas fever.

"Road check," announced Skaff.

Several Blueboys in black-and-tan camouflage suits stood at attention by their guard booths. One motioned them to stop. Skaff handed over their IDs with an envelope of money. The guard consulted his computer.

"You've already been scanned," he said. He returned the cards and waved them on.

They drove through the outer barrios of Caceres, and into a fog of psychomist blown off course from a Blueboy exercise that was being conducted further out into the swamps. The mist tripped an emotional release which sent Skaff into paroxysms of laughter about the money he'd wasted on the guard, but it left Jeri sick, with his head out the window. He made a promise to himself to get Eric out of Blueland at any cost.

Outside Eric's cell window, a raucous company of white, nearly transparent macaws twisted in the air and then dipped, all at once, much the way fish schooling in the river currents flitted this way and that by the workings of some communal instinct. Eric imagined that he'd been transported underwater, to the forests that flooded along the tributaries during the rainy season, and now that mystical place held him in stasis between land and water, earth and fire, between all the elements that bound the universe. He remembered the incident with the candiru. Remembered how he and his brothers had instinctually thought and acted as one in the old days, and he felt sad. He wanted his family again. Wanted simple days glowing with their camaraderie.

In a ceiba tree that arched over the cell, a monkey nibbled on epiphytes, and it looked to Eric like a smudge or a shadow. A spirit creature; all soul, no substance. He called for the beast to come closer, for he wanted to see it close up, to marvel at the brilliant adaptive camouflage it

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possessed. It remained elusive in front of him, though, with no individual details ever coming into focus. He could use that. With such protection, he could fool the blue men who would come to deliver him to the court of the Blue Queen. The woman who'd summoned him before. Forced him into tests. Forced him to tell her everything and anything she wanted. And in the end, she'd plied him with stimulants and kept him awake through the night with the heat of her touch. Forced him to love her. Hate her. Be dependent on her.

The door rattled, and the one named Trigger opened it and pulled Eric to his feet. Stepping outside, Eric blocked the mid-morning sunlight with his hand and slumped against the outside wall of his cell.

"Ten minutes," the Blueboy said.

Eric nodded. Sun felt wonderful on his skin.

Giving up on any effort to steady himself, he slid his back down the bumpy fiberglass wall, and sat with his legs straight out in front of him. He basked in the sun with his face turned toward it. His lizard brain, the tiny bulb of instincts that ruled his body, hummed beneath the more developed lobes of his cerebrum. He tuned out the psychobabble that ran through his head about his life at the Jiboa Hotel, about his friends, about his role as guinea pig for the Blueboy scientists. Though he was no longer experiencing the prescient visions that had confused him before the kidnapping, his thoughts still weren't clear. Pervasive dread ghosted through him. A confrontation awaited him, he knew.

He shut it out. Tried not to think of it, or to see beyond it to its resolution. Just vegetate in the sun.

"Ten minutes are up," the Blueboy said. "Time to show the General what yer hidin' from us."

Eric tried to raise himself, but he felt weak. The Blueboy helped him up, almost gently. He had not expected this, yet he was grateful. He wiped his dirt-specked palms on the khaki pants they'd issued him, looked around at the compound he must cross.

It was a small rent in the canopy of trees along the edge of the Pantanal. It contained three glass concrete research buildings, a long row of quonset huts, a small landing field with one hoverchop, and a pair of confinement cells, including his own. Since he'd last been there, they'd poured a pad for the hoverchop, and now a crew of Blueboys were cleaning out brush piles about the buildings. Yet the atmosphere remained the same. The base looked temporary. Five years in the future, the main buildings would be reduced to concrete bunkers, and everything that could be moved would have been stripped from the soggy land. Twenty years from now, the swamp would silt over the location of the compound itself. Mangroves would take hold with their steely roots.

"Move it."

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The Blueboy gripped Eric by the arm and tugged him toward the largest building in the compound. The walk seemed to take forever.

Inside an anteroom lit by skylights and tall narrow windows with screens, three Blueboys conversed. One was the Blueboy scientist who would ask Eric questions and read answers on rows and rows of dials. One was the medical technician who would administer the drugs. And one was the Blue Queen.

The Blue Queen approached him while the others continued with a conversation wholly consisting of technical jargon. She dismissed Trigger with a nod.

"Eric! I haven't seen you for a week." She held his hand and stroked it as if it were a purring cat. "I'm glad you agreed to return."

"Agreed?" he said, though his throat constricted.

"Why, yes." She pressed her fingers into his arm until they dug tiny curves into his muscles. "At least I hope you plan to stay."

Eric felt a prickly heat that expanded within him. All at once, he could say nothing. His thoughts became random and burned out of control.

A church parade had gathered a small crowd along the avenue, and a commotion started outside the lobby of the Jiboa Hotel as Jeri and Skaff parked the jeep. A Blueboy on solo patrol lifted two teenagers by the backs of their necks and let out a scream that forced Jeri to cover his ears. The kids, who copied the dress and skin color of Blueboys as part of a youthful fad, twitched and jerked. Grinning, the soldier let the kids collapse on the pavement, blood leaking from their ears. He sauntered away. Jeri pulled them inside while Skaff called an ambulance. After the vehicle arrived, and they'd given brief statements that Jeri knew would be ignored by local officials, he led Skaff to the core of the building, the place where the stairways started down and a great elevator well showcased an antique machine.

Other than the tiny lobby, this comprised the only part of the Jiboa still in use above ground anymore. The rest of the hotel had been abandoned when Mama Lavao had moved the guest rooms underground in fear of another heavy-water rainshower, or some equivalent horror yet to be unleashed by the Blueboy scientists. And business had boomed. Customers prefered the structure's womb-like safety, and claimed that the neural disruptions conjured up by the war games were eliminated below the ground. Negated for all except Eric. Eric seemed to be affected by the use of even the most distant neural scramblers, and so the brothers' rooms were housed at the bottommost level, where at least the effects on him were diminished.

"We must go down," said Jeri as he pointed to a set of stairs. He was still upset by the incident on the street.

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Skaff shook his head. "I've never taken the elevator. Let's ride."

The ironwork cage had been replaced by a clear seamless bubble, but the elevator ran on the original system of gears and cable-car lines. Its slow descent along a helical track was impressive. Jeri, however, remembered the stairs down to the four subterranean levels, the twisting and turning cases that were colored in whatever exotic paints Mama could find. These felt like the soul of the hotel to him, and they gave rise to the hotel's present name. The multi-hued Jiboa snake slunk along the edges of the Pantanal, staying within its camouflage of vegetation.

"But the stairs are quicker."

"I've been driving three days, a few minutes more won't matter."

Jeri nodded. As they boarded the elevator, a heavyset woman squeezed in with them. She clasped Jeri to her broad bosom. Her wide bronze face, without lines save for the curves about her mouth, smiled beneath a profusion of red-brown curls scented with orchids. She wore a floral dress and a gold crucifix.

"Jeraldo!" Mama Lavao said, as if the one word explained a longing hidden in the regal planet of her body. She punched a button, and the three of them began to drop along the track. "I arrived too late to help with the ambulance. But I'm so happy to see you." Her smile collapsed. "Eric is gone, though."

Jeri turned rigid and looked Mama in the eye. "Gone? When?"

"The bad boys came late last night. They've come before, but never like this. They just busted right through the building."

"Why did they take Eric? Do they still test him?"

"Yes."

"The Impresario didn't say *that* was the problem with his health."

"We avoided the truth in our letter, just to allow Mr. Rios to get it past inspection. I'm sorry. I always managed to get him healthy again after the testing with the money you'd send. I didn't think they were testing diseases on him, or anything. Just wearing him down." Her hazel eyes glazed with remorse. "He never quite recovered inside, though. He'd see them coming for him *before* it happened. Or have visions of mutated beasts rising up from the swamp. Crazy things, you know."

Skaff cleared his throat. "Drugged. He's drugged."

"I suppose," she said as tears ran along her cheeks. "Only there was little sign of it on his body. They worked on his *head*. The bad boys want his gift, you know."

The elevator passed the landing for the second sub-level as Jeri shook with rage. He stared up at the track that spiraled above them, and tried to divine a message in its twists, a revelatory pattern in the chaos of the world. They had Eric. He'd come home to repair the past; now Eric appeared beyond reparations.

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"Where did they take him?"

"We don't ask. I can't afford to. The fewer questions I ask the better it is for everyone at the hotel."

"Who would know, Mama?"

"The Impresario, if anyone," said Skaff.

"Possibly," Mama added, brightening again. "He'd talk with Eric quite often, afterward.

Jeri remembered the Impresario, a diminutive man who resided at Jiboa, the survivor of a wargames accident that had left him without an organic lower body. Several of Mama's staff were scarred and maimed by the military games, for she made a point of helping out that way, but The Impresario was her sole charity case as a boarder . . .save Eric, when he could no longer work. The Impresario holed up in the hotel, voicing a grudge against those who'd ruined him. But somehow he accepted his fate. Jeri no longer felt capable of that.

The elevator docked at the third level of Jiboa with a jolt, and the door slid open. Mama stepped out and waited for Jeri and Skaff.

"The Impresario's in the Commons, Jeri. I'll see you for dinner?"

"Both of us are starved, if that's okay? Skaff's had a long drive."

"He's welcome."

Jeri watched Mama stop at the mouth of a hallway, turn back and try to smile. She limped away.

"I don't think she likes me," Skaff commented.

"She's distracted."

Jeri heard the Impresario's sing-song voice echo from another hall, so they followed the sound. They found him on the burgundy rug of the Commons, holding court for a group of Americans with their video cameras.

In his mid-sixties, the Impresario reached medium height when he bobbed high on his bionic legs—crab legs—of fitted brass and fiber optic circuits lit in orange and yellow. He held his back ramrod straight, with the imperious attitude one might expect of a man trained within a strict *tandre* of an Argentinian military school. He had been robust once, in spite of his injuries, at the time Jeri had left for the mines, but a slow deterioration now gripped him, perhaps one of the unnamed diseases of a metamorphosing Amazonia. His neck showed all its veins and sinews. The cuffs on his blue uniform seemed baggy about his bony hands and shriveled neck. He still managed to keep his bald head shined, though, his white goatee trimmed, and his orator's voice, obviously, in good timbre.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've been ghostin' more and more of late." His face glowed with the light of rapture. "I've seen the hours raise their dark rigging. They're sailing away. Sailing toward that future moment,

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that skirmish with the powers that be. I can feel it up there, up the line.

"Tell us more," Jeri called out. The Impresario swiveled at the hip, broke into a laugh. Then he started speaking again, louder, drawing the walls in closer with his gestures.

"*This* man's seen it too. We've got to react *now*. Get out in the streets and raise our throats to the wind!"

"Amen," Skaff said, surprising Jeri.

"Yes, friends! We'll let the bells toll in our jaws. Let our voices climb. Or else we'll be digging graves again with our fingernails and feeling our bones ripen in the great heat. Things are coming to a head! Just you wait and see!"

The group tittered, clacking away in English.

Skaff took a deep breath. "Either we move with it, or we get swallowed in the dust."

The political vein of their talk intrigued Jeri. He considered the possibility that Skaff and the Impresario were kindred souls. They spoke as if using a code of chivalry, masking their displeasure with WestHem in rococo phrases.

"Friends," the Impresario said, with the slightest dip to effect a bow. "If you'll excuse me, I've business to talk with these fine gentlemen."

The group bowed in return, and wandered off toward the hallway. The Impresario strutted closer with some measure of skill on his mechanical limbs.

"Ah, Jeri. I've been expecting you." He canted as far forward as his frame allowed, and gave Jeri a firm hug. The old man sighed. Then he broke away and swiveled to greet Skaff.

"Pleased to see *you*, my good man." The Impresario shook Skaff's hand with vigor. "Most people call me the Impresario."

"I know. I'm Skaff Rios. I delivered your letter." Skaff brushed a hand through his hair. "Tell me, who are *they*?"

"A scientific group that's studying the swamp. But I believe it is a cover for an eccentric man, the tall black one weighted with gold necklaces."

"How eccentric?"

"Mama says he is a gourmet for exotic foods. And he understands that the Blueboys are mutating plants and animals in the swamp. I think he's interested in collecting specimens for his private greenhouses as well as for his studies."

Jeri groaned. "I just lost my appetite."

The Impresario spun at the waist and returned his attention to Jeri.

"I've missed you."

"It was your note that brought me."

"Our Eric is missing. You've heard, haven't you?"

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"From Mama, yes. And I know why."

"Oh?" That captured the interest of both the men.

"We had a run-in at the border. Blueboys looking for guerrillas. They ran a check on me, and no doubt realized that they'd better scoop Eric up while they could still find him. It was that damn Berkey woman." He shook his head grimly. "It began one winter. Then lasted another. Now they act as if they own this place and everyone in it. My brother isn't a toy."

The Impresario rubbed his left ear and tugged at his goatee. He flexed his metallic limbs—an innovation of the Blueboys' hi-tech—until he rose exactly to Jeri's eye level. Then he rocked forward, maintaining his balance on the thin stilts.

"*These* days, we speak about it in a more, ah, veiled manner. Because of the bad boys, you know. And the woman who leads them."

"Not me. I'm tired of pretending."

"Many of us are," said the Impresario. "But . . ."

"But nobody *fights* it."

"Would you be shocked, my boy, if I told you that I'd talked with friends who feel the same way you do? People who consider the treatment of your brother as symbolic of how terrible things have gotten. They want footage. They would like to write articles for the newspapers and networks, and petition the governments in São Paolo and Washington."

"Talk won't get him back."

"What if they had documented proof?" said Skaff.

Jeri raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"What if certain, you know, sources had a clue to where Eric was? And perhaps had the means for a rescue. Or at least for getting some of the bad boys', ah, indiscretions on film."

"You're talking about guerrillas, Skaff. I thought you were against getting involved?"

The man puffed up. "Yeah, maybe."

Jeri weighed Skaff's offer against his own need for rest. He felt tired and dirty, and groggy from the psychomists, yet a desire to retaliate burned inside him.

"What kind of force? Just a distraction, or enough men to meet the Blueboys head to head?"

The Impresario said, "Now, it might be a mistake to anger them. You've seen what they can do."

Maybe the Impresario believed what he'd said in the heat of speech, about a need for change, but he would only go just so far. It was obvious that he feared the Blueboys. Jeri wondered if this was even the same man as the one from his teenage years, the kindly, fastidious gentleman who adored chess and reminisced about his days as a peacekeeper on the

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southern Pampas rangelands. He would be no help. Still, Jeri doubted that Skaff would really be of much use either. The smuggler owned resources and men, no doubt, but he couldn't be counted on or trusted. He *was* a drug trader, after all . . .

But then, could Jeri afford to be choosy?

"Okay. Clue me in."

"Shall we talk someplace in private? There are details . . ." Skaff looked nervously about the Commons.

"Eric's room," Jeri said. Then, "How much of my savings will this cost?"

Skaff shrugged. "Cloaking devices and lasers don't come cheap."

Eric sensed that he lay flat, but only as a blind man senses the size and textures of the space about him. What he *saw* were things that did not exist. Or, actually, that did not *yet* exist.

Weighty kong sloths. Toy jaguars the size of a man's hand. A toucan whose beak shined with its own light. Trees the height of skyscrapers. Butterflies that lived off decaying flesh. Frogs that imitated brilliant mosses. Carnivorous mosses that in turn imitated those brilliant frogs. Fish of every imaginable perversion. Crocodiles large enough to swallow a motorized vehicle whole. Invisible stinging wasps that drove the unwary mad.

Visions bloomed for him and took hold.

And when Eric had answered every question that the scientists could ask, undergone ten hours of brain scans and mind probes, suffered drugs that coursed his veins and quickly ebbed, they delivered his tired body to the Blue Queen in her private quonset at the fringe of the compound. The hut smelled of orchids. A late afternoon breeze blew through the end windows, and Berkey offered him a drink while she changed into a nightgown that covered her synthetic skin in diaphanous folds.

Eric sat on her bed as she rubbed her hips against him. She dragged her hollowed fingernails down his arms and back as she undressed him. The light scratches flared with E-pheromones, and he found renewed energy; he shivered with sexual tension that caused his groin to tighten and ache for release. He reached for her. She escaped him.

Eric chased the Blue Queen, but she danced out of reach with power-augmented ease and laughed as he tripped over furniture and bumped into walls. She squeezed her arms together and jutted her breasts at him. Bared the twin halves of her ass. At last, she allowed herself to be caught and dragged to bed, and there she whispered in his ear, urged him to take her roughly, to vent his frustration on her. He entered her with a cry, and though Eric hurried his passion, hoping to reach the quick release that would free him, she dampened the sensory centers of his

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brain with drugs that sent cold tendrils up the backs of his legs and along his spine. Her extended nails gouged his buttocks. Three times she shuddered with pleasure, while he slapped himself against her on the brink of orgasm. A brink that he never seemed to be able to actually tumble over.

And when he was too exhausted to continue, to take her once more into pleasure, she held him. Stroked his head. Asked him questions he could not refuse to answer. And answer again. And again.

At twilight on the evening of Eric's abduction, two airboats packed with armed men emerged from the dark tunnel of a canal-like igarapee and eased out along the shadowy edge of a large stretch of the Pantanal. Jeri was squeezed into the bow of one airboat, content to let more experienced hands command the raid. His pilot was a fisherman, while a cocky little man named Vaqui—a leader of the insurgents—sat in the pilot's seat of the second boat. They cruised at a speed which allowed no more than a hum to echo across the water's surface, and they pulled alongside a small island dominated by two giant trees.

Jeri consulted with Vaqui through the distorting shimmer of the cloaking devices. Their voices wavered.

"You say the base is about three tenths of a kilometer more?"

"Yes," Vaqui said as his image warped toward Jeri. "The Blues call it D Base. There's nothing strategic or crucial about it, just an experimental center for engineering new strains of swamp life. But we suspect they experiment on people here too. Anyways, it's small, if Skaff's sources are correct."

Jeri stared at their crude map. "So no hoverchops."

"Not usually, those stay at the airbase. But we expect one with General Berkey there."

"Why for Berkey?"

"Our intelligence contact says that there are few people more powerful than her in the entire military."

"Won't that mean that there'll be more soldiers?"

"Maybe not. These Blueboys are fairly cocky about their superiority."

"And?"

Vaqui frowned and tugged at his camouflage hat. "Sorry, I've been avoiding some unpleasant news. Our contact said that she uses the base as a lover's rendezvous. A place to meet your brother. So we're expecting slack security."

"Eric?" Jeri pushed his mouth in a sarcastic twist. "I don't believe it."

"I doubt that he's a *willing* partner."

"My god!" Jeri stood and shook his fist at Vaqui. "What are we waiting for? Why did you keep that from me?"

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"We couldn't let you go off half-cocked. A raid takes a cool head and absolute secrecy."

"And dumb-ass patience," Jeri's pilot added. "I don't move our butts until I *know* our diversion has worked. You might as well chill it."

Jeri stood and paced in a tight circle through volunteers who checked their guns or sat and smoked. He wondered what else these people had kept from him. It made him pound his forehead in frustration. "I'm trying to understand why no one told me."

"Because you'd have done what you're doing now."

Jeri didn't hear Vaqui. Insects bit him through his sweat-soaked clothes. His beard stubble itched. He muttered and fidgeted until a woman guerrilla sat him down, lit a cigarette for him. The others on the boat talked to him soothingly, although it did little good.

Then the radio packet beeped on Vaqui's belt, a prearranged signal that meant another force of raiders had begun a harassment of Base C, twenty kilometers west of their position. Jeri picked out a lasrifle with a grenade launcher from an armory box recessed in the deck, then kneeled, his eyes fixed ahead.

Eric stirred on the Blue Queen's great round bed, and found himself spread-eagled again. The night was hot, without the breezes that had preceded dusk. Walls seemed to close in, seemed to tower and bend over him. Ugly thoughts flapped in his head like faceless bats. He rolled over and covered his head with a pillow. The visions continued.

Somewhere bright flashes clawed through the vines and fronds of the jungle, and two insectoid hoverchops rose above the canopy to spin about and cast more light. One hoverchop skidded in a crash when it dove too close to the enemy. A Blueboy radio call went out across the Pantanal for help.

Eric's own call stirred shadows in the jungle. Jaguars stopped licking their paws in the trees. Tapirs snorted and pulled back in their bunkers of dirt and decaying debris. Boas coiled tighter about their tree limbs.

Across the dark acidic waters, the caimans and jacares gathered in groups along the igarapees and within the open water courses where the water didn't stagnate. Mutated ones, the immense lizards that the Blueboys had tampered with, as they had tampered with him. Jaws clacked. Eyes glowed like coals above the waterline. These were the beasts that had haunted his dreams, yet now he saw them as possible allies. And the face of the largest one was human and familiar to him, achingly familiar.

"Eric. I'm coming for you," it said, with Jeri's voice.

The lizard lost substance, shrank, and floated to the ceiling. Whispering his name. Eric whimpered and pulled the pillows tight around his

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head. The Blue Queen rolled over and held him against her until the shaking subsided.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

She rubbed his back, then her touch inched down his buttocks until she reached his legs. Her fingers, with nails retracted, stroked his loose scrotum until it contracted.

Eric tried to block it out.

Tried not to respond to her coarse tongue moving across his belly, then coaxing him hard again.

At first, no spotlights flooded the compound, so Jeri donned an infrared helmet and used the scope on his rifle to monitor the combat soldiers as they geared up. The spots flicked on when the troopers boarded the hoverchop on the landing pad. With a roar, the vehicle lifted above D Base, with its running lights winking in red and blue. It froze in the sky for a moment, then zipped away toward C Base, its air rotors churning the forest canopies below it like a hurricane.

Vaqui and the other pilot started their air foils at the height of the hoverchop's vertical rev-up, and they gunned their way toward the base with their cloaking fields on. They traveled under a blackout, using the base as a homing target, and for a moment Jeri felt overwhelmed by its lights, seeing a pattern in their brilliance, a prophecy of death like the one he had sensed at Serra Pelada.

The boats hit the shallows and water splashed across Jeri's chest and under his visor, forcing him to think only of the moment, of the precise maneuvers they must execute. They skimmed up on a grassy strip. Both pilots cut their cloaking with their engines, saving them for the retreat, and with infrared helmets tracking for movement, the raiders bailed out onto the grass. From the top of Jeri's machine, the pilot shot down two dish communication antennae with a small built-on laser cannon, then the cannon tipped skyward, a beacon of fiery neon, as the pilot, shot himself, tumbled forward.

Blood on the man's khakis. Red laser light darting around them. Two more men fell as Jeri sprinted toward a row of quonsets.

Ball lightning materialized about the raiders, lashing out with random threads of electricity. A Blueboy in a jetpack arced toward the ground about twenty meters in front of them, positioning himself to cut Jeri down, but Jeri heard the whistle of his descent, guessed the trajectory, and fired a rifle grenade. The soldier crumbled before him as he landed, his chest smoking with a hole deep enough to bury a fist.

The voice called to Eric once more while he positioned himself on his knees and entered the Blue Queen from behind. He mumbled an obscen-

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ity. Shook his head.

"What's wrong?" she asked. This time she disengaged and snapped the lights on. "What is it?"

An alarm buzzed from her helmet on the bedstand, and she consulted someone through its speaker-remotes before unslinging her lasrifle and moving to the door.

In his mind, Eric envisioned someone in the shadows approaching the hut. An ally she would kill.

It took every ounce of strength in Eric to lift her pistol from its holster on the bedpost and follow the Blue Queen outside with it. It weighed tons, or seemed to.

Jeri sprinted for the end quonset, a fine vantage to command, but when he rounded the building he collided full-force with a Blueboy in a nightgown. The woman lost her weapon, staggered, yet kicked out and shattered Jeri's helmet and visor, sending him into a sprawl. He rolled onto his back. By then she'd poised her leg, heel pointed, to crush his nose and face. But a figure materialized from the doorway of the hut behind her.

With both hands, Eric pressed the barrel of the hand laser to the back of the Blue Queen's skull. "No!" he shouted.

She hesitated, and the man on the ground rolled away from her and leveled his rifle before she could make a move for Eric's gun.

"Freeze, Berkey."

The Blue Queen lowered her leg and stood still. The man whipped off the remains of his helmet, kicked her weapon into the brush. With the situation changed, and his gun where she could grab it, Eric panicked. Flung the weapon away. Saw it bounce between the quonset's stilt pilings and slide into the shadows underneath.

"You have me at a disadvantage," she said to the man. Her voice dripped with superiority and pouting sensuality.

The man spat at her. "No more than you've had my brother."

With that, the world spun in Eric's head, and he collapsed against a tree stump. The voice *was* JERI's. His brother had found him. His brother JERI had come home.

Jeri considered Eric's state and how few power moves it would take for the General to lock him in a death grip. He stepped between them and backed Berkey away by several meters. She didn't blink once.

"I haven't hurt Eric."

"Sure, just look at him."

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Jeri watched Berkey's face as she studied Eric where he lay, and his finger relaxed on the trigger when he saw how her eyes softened with a touch of regret.

"Oh, Eric. You knew this would happen. Didn't you?"

A spurt of adrenalin made his head explode with heat. He saw deeper. He sensed the truth behind her concern. She was probing Eric, trying to sway him to admit to, or use, the psi powers he'd kept hidden, to give her concrete evidence to twist for her own purposes. Even with her life on the line, Berkey played for higher stakes.

"What will you do with me, then?" she asked Jeri. Her words were coy, suggestive.

"You'll make a valuable prisoner."

Her smile turned feral. Her nails extended and retracted reflexively. "You assume that you'll take this base. Even without communications, we will crush you. We're elite warriors, not rag-tag mercenaries."

"Shut up. You're in no position to bargain."

"On the contrary. If you don't surrender now, I'll have you both killed."

"We may be killed anyway."

She smouldered at him. "I didn't expect to see *you* again so soon, though I thought when I did, it would be . . .different."

She eased toward him, moving her body with sinuous grace, jutting her breasts ahead of her. He stared; the heat rose in him, intoxicating him. Jeri blinked rapidly. He remembered how she'd marked him with the E-pheromones, and his heat turned to rage. He shook with the urge to kill her.

"Move slowly," he said in a growl. "Toward the hut."

She shifted her weight, stepped slowly toward the door. Bracing his lasrifle in his armpit, Jeri raised Eric with one arm and followed her inside, just as a lightning ball crackled over the roof. She searched the bare floor, as if discerning a message in the pattern of knots and holes in the boards, and then sat in a specific spot. Jeri saw nothing alarming about this behavior. It seemed engineered to confuse him, to throw him off. He let Eric collapse on the bed and moved opposite Berkey to wait for a lull in the firefight. He'd deal with her when it was time to make a run for the boats.

The door burst open. Jeri glanced briefly to the intruders, but held his aim steady on the woman.

"Jeri!" The voice belonged to Vaqui.

"What's happened?"

"We've routed the base. The lightning weapons must have attracted the big crocs, the monster ones. They're eating Blueboys and ignoring us. It's incredible. Many Blueboys have deserted their positions. We've bolted the survivors in the lab freezers and reinforced the doors."

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Berkey showed no expression.

"Not her, though," the guerrilla said. "Her, we blow away. Without a leader, the Blueboys can't organize a retaliation."

"What about the video footage on their labs? Proof of what they're doing here?"

Vaqui laughed. "The film never mattered, really. We've hurt them and freed a comrade. Imagine how much press *that* will get! Something to rally around. That is, if we get our asses out of here."

"My brother needs help."

Jeri stood and slung his rifle over his shoulder, and pulled Eric to his feet just as Berkey made a blitzkrieg move. She smashed her hand through the floor, grabbed Eric's pistol—which she'd determined to be there by some special method of sensing—and then fired as she vaulted for the end window. Vaqui took a shoulder hit. The frame shattered before her and sprayed glass through the room; Berkey was gone. Jeri made Eric run before him out the door.

Near the waterfront, Vaqui's men were carrying the wounded. An airboat started and backed out into the swamp just as the hoverchop returning from C Base showed over the treeline and hung in the air above the fight, unsure about landing and, no doubt, unsure as to what was going on. Finally, it began to fire its laser cannon, but too late to be effective. The boat was retreating, with its cloak on.

Jeri let Eric fall in the grass while yelling for someone to help him, then he sprinted for the second airboat, that had stayed hidden by a low overhanging tree. Red beams cut the dirt a meter to his right. He climbed over several wounded men on stretchers at the bow and swung into the pilot's seat. In a fluid motion, he righted the laser cannon and flipped on the image screen. It worked; the battery pack hadn't burned out when the original gunner had been hit. He cut out the automatic targeting, spun the cannon, and slammed the fire toggle three, four times.

A thick beam cut past the tree limbs and disappeared to the right of the hoverchop. Then another, closer in. Another. The hoverchop homed in with a return volley that set the leafy cover afire and seared the hair on the side of his face. Jeri jerked the beam left and heard a thump-and-roar as the hoverchop exploded into streamers of sizzling metal. The men hooted in celebration, but small arms fire continued to pump past them from somewhere in the jungle. A few of Vaqui's boys answered. Then a cannister of psychomist burped in the shallows to their rear, an ineffective shot smothered by the water.

Vaqui dragged Eric on board and then collapsed beside him on the deck. Two stragglers sprayed light fire as they stood at the bow. Jeri cut a couple of swaths with the cannon until a replacement pilot moved him from the seat. They pulled out, gun barrels aglow from repeated firing,

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and no one answered their barrage as the cloaking field flickered on and the rotors kicked up spray. In the receding glow of the spotlights, a swarm of crocodiles scrambled around the quonsets and moved off into the jungle. Jeri heard screams. He thought he saw a crocodile the size of a tank raise its jaws and shake the body of a Blueboy like a rag doll. Somehow, as if Eric's gift coursed through him, he knew it was the soldier named Trigger.

After making Eric comfortable, Jeri moved alongside Vaqui and pointed to the shore while he helped him bandage his shoulder. They watched as the base shrunk to a blob of light.

"They won't be happy over losing that hoverchop," Jeri yelled over the motor noise. "Or the men."

"Doesn't matter. We hurt them bad enough that they can't strike back hard. Not immediately." Vaqui shook his head. "Wish I'd killed the woman, though. That would have been a blow!"

"Maybe."

Jeri tuned Vaqui out as he continued to bandage him. The man's bloodthirsty attitude didn't ring true with the original agreement on their objectives. Suddenly he felt alone, and it occurred to Jeri that this was how he'd begun the adventure: cruising one-way through Blueland, soaked to the bone, and hollering over the sound of an engine to someone he had every reason to mistrust.

The pilot eased off on the gas and turned toward an inlet.

The boat levitated above the water. It seemed to Eric that he was transported on heavenly breath into a featureless gap between two dark thronelike swamp trees, then onto an open flat island. Their ascension came to an abrupt halt. Voices cried out. Urged them to get the wounded off, guided by the cyclops eye of a single flashlight.

"So you got him," a fat man said as he clicked out the light and helped Eric from the boat with his brother. Eric heard the excitement in the men's voices in the dark, and it seemed also to be bubbling from within him and spilling back through everyone.

"Skaff. What are you doing here?" Jeri said.

"Offering you alternative transport. The boats aren't safe. We've got an ultralite plane."

"We? Since when did *you* join the guerrillas?"

"I never left them. I was a part of it all along. Delivering the letter, playing it as though I were reluctant to help unless I got my profits. And backing the lie about publicity footage and attacking the Blues in the press. The whole bit. Sorry. Our leader thought it best."

A half-man materialized from a swarm of figures busy in the near dark about them. Eric's friend and confidant. Secret leader of the guerrilla

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forces. He embraced Eric, and as he did, Eric saw the shock in his brother's face.

The Impresario said, "I'm glad we got you out, son."

Jeri pushed the Impresario away from him, and Eric sensed wild tension.

"*I* got him out." Jeri spat. "I don't need help any more. Not from you. You planned it all without including me. You put Eric's life on the line."

"All of our lives are on the line. That's what it is like here, Jeri. You've been away too long to see how desperate things have become. Our time draws near. We can't turn away."

"Shit! Cut the propaganda crap."

"As you wish," the Impresario said as he bowed. "We can argue later. Right now you *do* need us."

Eric followed the loping werewolf stride of the Impresario across a moonlit glade, and the man strapped Eric and Jeri into a stripped down airplane built for four. The man called Skaff stopped next to Jeri and leaned close.

"Things may get hot, still. If the Blues retaliate tonight, we have people ready to resist."

"Why risk it? They won't be caught by surprise a second time."

"Ah, but a *real* battle would draw media attention around the globe!"

Skaff slapped Jeri on the back and settled himself at the nose. He started the engine. They slid into the darkness, lifting out over the water and the forest dappled with pale moonbeams. The Impresario dangled his glittering bionic legs like a fisherman trolling, hoping, perhaps, to catch his fate.

Jeri sensed a tug at his shoulder, and he bent until his forehead was resting against his brother's.

"Jer?" Eric's eyes were big.

Jeri ran his fingers through Eric's hair and forced a smile, relieved that he no longer needed to keep his adrenalin pumping.

"Don't worry," Eric said. His face softened. "She won't touch us. I know this."

"Did you call up the caimans against her?" he asked Eric. "Did you *know* to do that?"

"Yes." Eric smiled feebly. "I'm sorry. That's what she wanted, wasn't it? For me to expose what Mama calls my gift?"

"Yes. But she got more than she bargained for. Eh?"

Eric mumbled. He fell asleep.

Though time had become elastic for him during the raid it caught Jeri by surprise when the morning sun rose. Skaff cheered while the Impresario called out the locations of firefights in Caceres and along the edges of the swamp, rocking the plane with gleeful idiocy, and, as the

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true extent of the Impresario's manipulations dawned on Jeri, the truth of how he'd been used, Jeri barked a laugh.

It didn't matter that his brother was just a spark to blow the keg, an excuse for an uprising. He didn't care about their lies to him. Or their hidden motives, which—as he suspected now—could be reduced to basics like self-interest and guilt for Skaff, and revenge for the Impresario. And Jeri didn't want to think about how simply they had subverted him. How gullible he'd been. How easily they'd exploited his own guilt and anger from the moment they found him at the gold mine.

He cared only that he had Eric. No more, no less.

The sky danced with light, and explosive echoes skipped across the water and bounced up from the canopied islands. Eric awoke against Jeri's shoulder. He began to sob. Jeri tried to cry with him, to share release, but he found his emotions steeled against it. They weren't free of Blueland yet. He held Eric close and watched as Skaff led them like a madman, yelling and dipping the plane, transporting them into the new and terrible possibilities of the future.●

FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

IN AND OUT

Guess who's the in preposition this year
  And who, word has it, is out on her ear?
Yes, In is in without a doubt,
  And just as clearly Out is out.

In is sleekly, chicly thin;
  Poor Out is overweight and old.
In has supple, silken skin;
  Out's is afflicted with some kind of mold.
In has dozens of intimate friends,
  But Out has only Down.
In has money, and spends and spends
  Till envious Out would like to drown
    Or seal In a kiln to brown
      Or skewer on a javelin
That preppiest of prepositions, In.

—Tom Disch

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THE HOLE IN EDGAR'S HILLSIDE

by Gregory Frost

Gregory Frost has had three fantasy novels published, and he recently sold his first science fiction book, *The Pure Cold Light,* to Avon. Mr. Frost lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and teaches short story writing at Temple University.

"I think the cat's caught something again."

"What?"

"A mouse, I think."

"Well, open the door and see."

She had been looking through the window in the storm door. Not wishing to have a mouse dragged through the living room, she opened the door just an inch or two.

The sky outside threatened rain.

"No, it's not a mouse, it's—" She stopped, crouched down. The cat was sitting on the small concrete porch, triumphant over his prey. "Oh, my God! Honey—Ted, I think you'd better come here."

The newspaper rattled. Making grumbling noises, her husband walked down the steps to the landing. "All right, what?"

"Here, look."

He knelt beside her, groaning slightly at the effort. "Where?" She edged out of the way to let him see through the crack in the door. The first thing he saw was Edgar, the cat, squatting on the concrete with eyes hugely black, wild, and crazy. He had to reach past his wife and push the door further open to see the other thing.

At first he doubted his own eyes. Then he figured out that the cat had picked up a piece from some neighbor kid's playset. "It's just a *toy,*" he said annoyedly, and reached out. The cat growled, and he drew his hand back.

Esther said, "Wait, I'll take care of him." She opened the door wide and stepped out. "Good kitty! Oh, *good* boy!" She stroked Edgar's head. He stood, raising his tail, mincing in place, proud and happy to be made a fuss over. After all, he'd brought his kill all the way home just for *them.* "Let's give you some food, monster," and she swept the fifteen-

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pound tabby up in her arms. He glanced back worriedly at his abandoned kill as she carried him inside.

Ted put one foot out onto the stoop to prop the door open while he scooped up the unicorn. The instant he touched it, he almost flung it away in disgust. "Ugh," he said. He overcame his revulsion, and brought it closer.

The unicorn was very dead. It had bled from puncture wounds at its throat, and its neck appeared to be broken. It was still warm. Ted took one finger and nudged its legs, noting its unshod hooves, its tufted fetlocks. He prodded its tiny muzzle with his pinkie, pushing up the lip to see its very real teeth and lolling tongue. Carefully, he pressed at the tip of the spiraled golden horn. "Esther, . . . " he said, then realized he'd barely made a sound, cleared his throat and shouted, "Esther, come here!"

"Just a second," she replied, "I'm giving him his treat."

That second lasted a million minutes for Ted. Crazy thoughts banged around in his head like BBs in an engine, tearing up the works.

"All right," she said, "what?"

He showed her.

They sat on the couch, both hunched over the little corpse, which lay on a china plate on the coffee table. "What if he's the last one?" she asked, breaking the silence. Ted frowned at her. "Well," she said. "We haven't exactly seen a thousand of the little things prancing around, have we? It *could* have been the last of its kind."

"We'll have to call the Smithsonian."

"I'll pay to hear *that* call. 'Hello, Smithsonian? My name's Ted Heubler, and I have this unicorn lying on my coffee table.' Remember what happened in the Thurber story?"

He remained silent, mulling over the term "booby-hatch."

"Okay, suppose it *isn't* the last one," she suggested. "What if there's a whole herd of 'my little ponies' out there? What are we going to do about Edgar?"

"Edgar?" He glanced at the cat, who solemnly met his gaze, having heard his name. They traded judgmental looks.

"He's going to keep hunting them," she explained.

Ted pursed his lips. All of a sudden, he smiled. "That's *right*," he said. "That's right, he will. He *will*. Won't you, you *good* kitty?" He reached over and patted the cat's head. His wife stared at him as if he'd gone mad; he never talked to the cat like that. "*Good* kitty," he said again. He grinned at her. "All we have to do is *follow* him, don't you see? The next time he goes out? He's going to go hunt in the woods again, and *we* just follow him, right to where he caught this critter." She blinked. He

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repeated, "He's going to keep hunting them." He stood. "I'll go get our coats."

"What if he doesn't want to go out?" she asked, but the cat, anticipating things, bounded out of the room and down the stairs to the front door. Esther looked over the railing at him making figure eights on the landing. "Okay, get our coats. I'd better get my hiking boots, too. God knows where we're going."

Rain drizzled erratically out of the gray sky. She wore a green vinyl poncho, and he wore an oilcloth coat from Australia that he loved, even though he had to treat it periodically and it made the rest of his coats smell like a dock.

The cat drove them crazy, checking out every piece of ground, every bush, on his trek across the various front lawns. "He thinks he owns the whole damn development," Ted grumbled. At one point, a raindrop must have nailed Edgar, because he suddenly bolted as if he'd been electrified, and ran for the hills.

The houses edged a large wooded area that wrapped around the hillside. They felt fortunate that it hadn't been cleared in the traditional manner when the development had been erected. At first they'd speculated that the developers might have been ecologically conscious, but one of the other neighbors cleared the matter up, explaining that a farmer who ran a dairy on the far side of the hill owned the stretch of woods, and that he'd flatly refused to sell. Esther and Ted were glad of it, frankly, since there was nothing they liked more than the smell from those pines wafting through the windows on a breezy night.

The cat prowled slowly, errantly, pausing to sniff at leaves. At one point, they stood around while he dug himself a little toilet in the loose detritus. He pretended all the while that he didn't see them, just as they pretended not to be there.

He took them through rusted and forgotten barbed wire fences, strung like a wicked trap in the dimness of the deeper woods. The trees on the hillside were enormous, without branches for a good twelve feet overhead, and seemed to absorb the sound of their footsteps. The air was full of pine and earth.

After awhile, Ted muttered, "I didn't know he went *this* far."

"I didn't think the woods did, either."

They came to where the forest floor leveled off in a narrow valley covered mostly by short, broad-leafed green vegetation. The cat stopped suddenly. He crouched down low, ears flattened. Like two secret agents, his owners ducked back to press themselves against two trees. "What's he got?" she hissed.

"I don't see anything . . ."

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Edgar's hind end pistoned furiously, and then he pounced. He ripped through the plants at full speed. Something ahead of him ran for its life in a flash of tan. Spying it, they jumped from hiding and sprinted to keep up. The cat looked like a leopard in a documentary. His prey turned, bounding into view for a second; it was another unicorn all right. Edgar agilely cut back, too, right on the unicorn's heels. Esther couldn't believe the gracefulness with which he maneuvered his bulk, the ripple of muscles in his back.

The race led right up against an outcropping of rock. By the time Ted and Esther got there, the cat and his prey had disappeared. They searched the face of the rock, which was sharp, layered, and black, like an exposed bed of shale. No cat. Ted ran around the side and climbed up on top. No cat.

It was Esther who finally made the discovery. She got down among the ground cover and found the opening. "Ted!" she cried, and the urgency in her voice brought him sliding down on his rear.

He crawled up beside her and looked. At the base of the outcropping, there was a hole. It was much like the entrance to a small animal's den, except that light was pouring out of it.

"What *is* this?" Ted asked incredulously. He scooched up on his soggy knees and pressed his face against the rock.

Through the hole, he could see a broad rolling field of grass, and a beautiful blue sky, and, way off in the distance, a castle.

Withdrawing, he looked at Esther and laughed.

"I know," she said. "I don't believe it either." She leaned in for another look, and yanked her head back with a cry as the cat came shooting out of the hole. He blasted off through the woods, his tail stiff and big as a boa.

"At least we know where he went," Ted observed.

Esther was about to lean back down, when the sharp-pointed striped tip of a long stick emerged from the hole, followed a heartbeat later by a miniature galloping destrier and armored knight. The knight reined in the horse and lowered his lance. "Whit ha'e, that's vanquished the beastie!" he said, with satisfaction. He pushed up his visor and looked around. "Odd's bollocks, now! Whit manner of place be this?" His attention was caught by Esther's flannel sleeve rising up out of the leaves, and he followed it with his eyes, tilting his head, until he was staring up into *her* eyes, which must have seemed the size of dinner plates from his perspective. His face went pale as milk. His lips trembled. Gently, he jiggled on the reins to turn his horse; surreptitiously raised his lance till it rested against the rondel on his breastplate. "Methinks we'll gae back inside now, Averil," he announced to his mount, "before we give

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the impression that we're trespassing, which we're *definitely not,* gracious, *no.*"

Ted leaned down. "Wait a second," he said.

"Ted!" Esther snapped.

The knight shrieked, "Ah, God save me!" and kicked his horse into a panicked gallop as the giant made a grab for him. Lance, horse, and rider shot back into the hole.

"Damn it!" Ted cursed. He had caught only a fistful of dirt.

"Nice going, dear."

"Well, you would have let him turn around and get away."

"He *did* turn around and get away," she said acidly.

Muttering, Ted stared with her into the hole. A horde of people were approaching across the field from the castle, tiny men and women dressed in strange clothes. The knight rode back to them, then dismounted and began talking frantically to a bearded old man in the lead, while gesturing back toward the hole. More circumspectly thereafter, the crowd drew near the entrance. The bearded leader came forward alone, scowling. He studied the edges of the hole, but seemed unaware of Ted and Esther watching from the other side.

"I see," said the bearded little man. "Do we have young Megistus among us today?"

After some mumbling among them, the crowd pushed forward a skinny, pimply young man wearing tights and a red leather jerkin.

"*You* did this, didn't you?" accused the old man. "You stole my book and broached the sky, *didn't* you, you walking pottage?"

Megistus put a bold face on it. "Yeah, as I'm apprenticed, ain't I?"

"Apprenticed? You recreant, the only thing *you're* good for is test ammunition for a ballista!" Almost nonchalantly, while he spoke, the old man made a few peculiar gestures with his hands, the shapes of which hung in the air like clouds. Then the clouds began to expand. A few pebbles trickled down the face of the outcropping; one bounced off Ted's skull. He drew back, saw what was happening, and snatched Esther away just as the whole trembling, sparkling face of rock cracked and thunderously collapsed. The entire hillside flashed with a light like a hundred flashbulbs going off, the glare sizzling up the trees and into the sky like inverted lightning. Shadows shot through the woods. A booming echo rolled through the hills.

"Oh, no!" Esther cried and attempted to scramble back, but Ted wouldn't let her go until the last bits of rock had stopped falling. The hole had disappeared. Whole slices of shale had slid out like shelves and buried it. Esther wanted to get picks and shovels. Ted told her she was wasting her time.

"It won't be there anymore, no matter how far you dig. It's gone." She

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said nothing. Of course he was right. The old man was a magician, and he had repaired whatever rent in space the boy had caused. She got up and hugged her husband.

"I'm glad I didn't see it alone. You'd never have believed me."

"Let's try to find Edgar," he said.

"All right."

They tramped home in a light rain. The woods seemed to thicken at the approach of evening. A thin mist curled in the valley, but they soon outdistanced it. They came within sight of their home without a sign of Edgar.

Ted started chuckling. "I can't help it," he said when she stared at him, "I'm forever going to see that stupid cat come tearing out of that hole with his fur standing up and that teeny little knight chasing after him."

Esther thought about it and started laughing too. "He probably ran right through the kitty door in the garage and into the house."

"Lucky we *had* one, or he might have gone straight through the wall." They laughed a little more.

Once inside, they called his name, but Edgar didn't come out. Without removing her coat, Esther went in search of him. Ted fixed himself a drink. "Well," he crowed, "at least we've got ourselves a real live—well, *dead*—unicorn. We've got *proof*." He took his drink into the living room. "Yessir, we've got that."

He sat on the couch. For a few moments he just stared at the plate and blinked. Then his face swelled with rage. "Where's that cat?" he yelled, standing again. "You find him? I'm going to *kill* him!"

She poked her head out of the den. "What's wrong now?"

He picked up the plate and carried it to her. "*This* is what's wrong. Look!"

All that remained on the plate were four little hooves and a small golden horn, and a tail. "Oh," she said.

"He'd *better* hide, the little sonofabitch. I get my hands on him, I'll—"

"*We* left it out on the table. It's not *his* fault. Besides, we don't know he ate it—maybe it just disintegrated."

"Why do you always take the cat's side?"

"He can't defend himself."

"Oh, so you're the Perry Mason of the furball set?"

She knew his mood—there was nothing to gain by trying to reason with him. She searched for the cat some more, but he was nowhere to be found. It was as if he'd disappeared along with the unicorn.

Ted rolled over. The light on Esther's night-table glared at him. His wife lay propped up beside him, neither reading nor trying to disguise

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the concern tormenting her. He was exasperated with the cat, but knew better than to express it. Instead, he said tenderly, "He'll come back."

She wouldn't look at him, but she replied, "The *woods* got him. When the big light flashed, it *got* him."

"Kind of a leap in intuition, isn't that?"

"I don't care. I know."

He opened his mouth to reply when there came a heavy pounding at the front door. "What was that?" he muttered. They traded looks. The pounding returned, hard enough to shake the foundations.

Ted sat up, grabbed his robe from the chair beside the bed, and stuck his feet in his slippers. "Somebody's at the door," he said declaring the obvious.

He shuffled down the hall, Esther following him, and down the stairs to the split-level landing. Cautiously, he peered out through one side window while Esther peered out the other. Neither could see a thing, even after Ted switched on the yard light. Warily, he unlocked the door and opened it a crack. "There's nobody there," he said, although there was something odd about the trees across the yard that he couldn't quite place. He stuck his head out.

"Excuse me," a voice called. It was a big, *deep* voice, like rocks grinding together in an avalanche. The thing about it was, it seemed to be coming from the *roof.*

Together, the two of them stepped out onto the stoop and looked up.

An enormous, bearded face, bigger than the moon, stared down at them. The moonlight outlined the shoulder and the bent back, which they traced down through the dark to the legs, which looked like a pair of extra trees—which, of course, was what Ted had seen but not comprehended. He tried fruitlessly to speak.

The giant said, "I brung ya back the littul kit-te." He lowered his hand, unfolded log-sized fingers, and Edgar jumped down and fled for his life between Ted and Esther into the house. "I didn't want he should get lost, ya know?"

"Thank you," Ted squeaked.

"Yes, thank you very much," Esther whispered. "We were worried about him. It won't—won't happen again."

"Oh, youse are very welcome, I'm sure." The giant straightened up, his head vanishing into the sky. His feet emerged from behind the trees and he tramped off across the lawn, leaving wading-pool size depressions in the sodden turf.

Like a fairy couple enclosed in a cocoon of floodlight, Ted and Esther watched as the giant picked his way gingerly between the other houses, then merged into the blackness of the woods. A moment later, the trees lit up in a bright silent flash that soared into the sky like an aurora and was gone.●

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NEXT ISSUE

Another year of top-of-the-line, State-of-the-Art science fiction stories starts next issue with a big, powerful, and vivid new novella by **Steven Utley,** our January cover story, "The Glowing Cloud." In it, Utley takes us to the troubled island of Martinique in 1902, in company with a somewhat reluctant time-traveler who must hunt down a former colleague gone renegade, with the fate of history itself in the balance, and do it before they all are destroyed by one of the greatest natural disasters of all time—the awesome eruption of Mount Pelée on the morning of May 8, 1902.... This is as compelling and suspenseful a story as you're likely to see this year, one that will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very last line—don't miss it!

ALSO IN JANUARY: **Harry Turtledove** takes us to an Alternate Reality you definitely *don't* want to live in, and shows us how the people who *do* have to live there manage to survive "In the Presence of Mine Enemies"; new British writer **Stephen Baxter** makes an impressive *IAsfm* debut, taking us deep into a bewilderingly complex high-tech future for a dangerous confrontation with bizarre alien forces at "Planck Zero"; **Molly Gloss** returns with a moving portrait of a woman in the process of making the most important—and irreversible decision of her life, in "Verano"; Hugo-winner **Lawrence Watt-Evans** spins a fast-paced tale of big-city cops who have to deal with problems a lot more complicated than the usual run of street crime (like the *streets* themselves disappearing, for instance, for starters) in "Storm Trooper"; hot new Australian writer **Greg Egan** sweeps us along with him for a suspenseful and chilling ride deep "Into Darkness"; and Nebula-winner **Michael Bishop** returns with a wry, ironic look at the moral complexities of war, in "The Balloon." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 10, 1991.

COMING UP IN 1992: Another year of great *IAsfm* stories, from science fiction superstars like **Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Avram Davidson,** and **Isaac Asimov** himself, to stories by established professionals like **Mike Resnick, Ben Bova, Charles Sheffield, Tom Purdom, S.P. Somtow,** and **Pat Cadigan,** to the work of rising new stars such as **Tony Daniel, Mary Rosenblum, Rebecca Ore, R. Garcia y Robertson, Allen Steele, Maureen McHugh, Elizabeth Hand, Ian R. MacLeod,** and many more. Subscribe today, using the form on page 41, and see why *IAsfm* won the *Locus* Reader's Poll as Best Magazine yet again this year, why *IAsfm* has more stories on this year's final Hugo Award ballot than all the other magazines *combined,* why *Locus* has called us "the flagship of progressive science fiction," and why *The Austin Chronicle* called us "the most consistently innovative and readable SF magazine on the newsstands today." Subscribe *today,* and miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1992!

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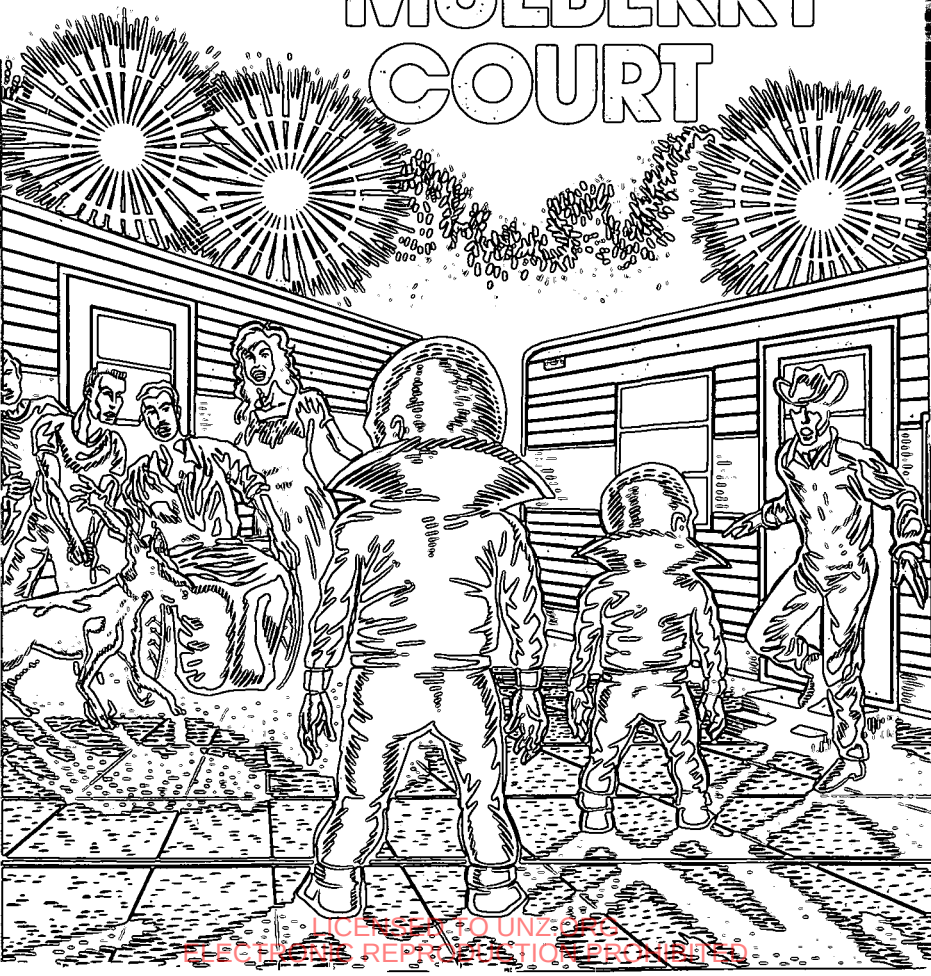
Peni R. Griffin's last story for *IAsfm* was her enigmatic "Books" in our November 1991 issue. She returns to our pages, now, to chronicle the strange goings on...

ONE NIGHT IN MULBERRY COURT

by Peni R. Griffin

art: Brent Cardillo



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Danny announced his arrival with a playful whistle. "What are you all dressed up for, Mama?"

Lupe twirled so that the festive red skirt stood out. "Russ and Chip's tenth anniversary, remember? You coming?"

"Maybe later. I got an economics paper to finish." Dan put his books on the cramped desk in the corner of the living room, fingering the folded newspaper on top. "Will the Munchkin be there?"

"Can anybody have a party anymore without Trini's sound system? Oh, shoot! Where'd all that gray hair come from? It wasn't there this morning."

"Leave it, Mama. It looks distinguished. Mama, I read something in the *News* today."

"What, that gray hair's coming into style?" She looked past herself in the mirror, and saw Danny was troubled. "Don't frown so much. You'll get all wrinkled like your daddy."

He thrust the *Express-News* under her nose and tapped an article at the bottom of the page. "Read that."

She glanced at his serious face and obliged him.

> NEW YORK CITY (AP): A routine homicide has created considerable speculation among law enforcement officials in the Big Apple, in conjunction with four other cases in that city over the past three years. The common factor in these cases was the involvement of persons under four feet tall, all with skins of various shades of blue—

Lupe felt a tingle of excitement. "You know, she always said there were others around. If they were going to study Earth very much at all, there'd have to be."

"The NYPD think it's a cult," said Danny. "Like Moonies or something. Where maybe God is a blue midget and if you want to be saved you have to dye yourself. And all these people had apartments full of fancy doodads, just like Trini's trailer."

"Did they all say they were anthropologists from Alpha Centauri?" asked Lupe curiously.

"No, but their neighbors all said they were nosy. Two of them tried to get jobs without Social Security numbers and disappeared when the immigration people were called in. One of them skipped out when his landlord reported him for getting pay TV without a cable hookup. One of them reported being mugged, but they never found the mugger and nobody ever saw her again. Mama, Trini's not just one harmless little lunatic. There's a whole gang of them. Maybe all over the country."

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"Don't be silly." Lupe laid the paper aside and chose a lipstick. "You just never liked her."

"I like her fine, Mama, but she's crazy."

"Crazy people got to live somewhere, too," Lupe pointed out equably. They had had this argument about once every three months since Trini had moved in three years before. "Anyway, she paid for the lot up front, and never caused a lick of trouble."

"I just wish you wouldn't stick your neck out for people, Mama! What happens when she turns out to be the leader of a terrorist cult and you gave her a place to keep her bombs and helped her get a job?"

"It's not bombs. I'd like to see you get such good HBO reception on a bomb."

"Mama, would you be serious? Sometimes I think you believe her stories."

"Well, honey, she is blue. And did you ever find that company that makes her oval trailer?" She knew he hadn't. That trailer bothered him more than anything else about their tenant. "I think it'd be neat if she were telling the truth."

"Great. Even if it's true, Mama, she's an illegal alien."

"So's your grandfather. You want I should ship him out? Look, I got to go. I got all the fajita fixings."

She went out into one of those mellow April evenings San Antonio does so well; mulberries ripening, gardens blooming furiously, mockingbirds and squirrels chatting amiably. Lorne Griswell joined her as she came down Row B, his lap full of paper plates and cups, and she accommodated herself to the pace of his wheelchair. The Munchkin Egg—a bronze-colored trailer, nestled in a forest of flowers and complicated, frail-looking metallic constructions—was already empty as they passed, and Trini was busy with the conical complexities of her sound system at Russ and Chip's lot on Row F. Chip was starting the charcoal. Their new friend Davis set out the lawnchairs, and Russ, who worked at Radio Shack, gave Trini a hand.

As she approached, Lupe tried to look at Trini as if she were a stranger, and had a moment of double vision—a squat, gaudy freak, improbably light on her broad flat feet, superimposed upon a jovial woman with clear cerulean skin and piercing amber eyes, hands coarsened by hard work, face lined with good nature.

"My, oh, my, don't y'all look fine!" Chip waved his lighter at Lupe and Lorne as they entered the lot. "You didn't forget the fajitas, did you? Oh, you're a doll. Put 'em right over there."

"I wish I could get one of these," said Russ wistfully, hooking the portable generator to the hollow in the side of the cone. "I love the way you can go to any part of the tape without rewinding."

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"Even if you found it, it'd cost a fortune," said Lorne. "How you doing, Munchkin?"

"Just fine." Trini blew him a kiss and fiddled with the connections.

"We've asked often enough, but you never told us where on Earth we can get a system like that," said Lupe.

"Can't, on Earth. I reckon—mind, technology isn't my bag—I reckon it'll be another ten, twenty years before the necessary principles will occur to anyone here." The speech patterns she had picked up from her neighbors were odd and charming combined with her rapid, guttural accent. "Or maybe you'll think of something entirely different. People do. My folks are just blown away by the internal combustion engine. We'd never thought of it."

"Good for you," said Chip, a member of six or eight ecological societies. "Saved yourselves some hideous tragedy."

"Not so's you'd notice. Every society creates its own hideous tragedies. There. I brought all three party discs. What you want to hear?"

"Which one's got Jane Oliver in the middle? Number two? Just start that at the beginning and play it all the way through."

Trini shoved a disc into a slot, thumbed a dark circle on the instrument's smooth surface, and Glen Campbell started singing "Southern Nights."

All parties at Mulberry Court proceeded in the same way. The tenants who felt like coming got dressed up, if they happened to enjoy dressing up, and wandered in bearing their contributions—Rose Perez with a family pack of hot dogs and three liters of Coke Classic; the Weidners with wine cooler and Shiner beer; Ethel Roth with a German chocolate cake. Lorne and Jake Weidner discussed Jake's latest lead on the Lost Bowie Mine. Flower Sullivan set up her wok near the grill to discuss auras and consciousness with Chip while frying vegetables. The community children ran in and out playing Frisbee with Chip's dog Alec. Davis, unused to the company, sat on the trailer step with a Shiner between his knees, visibly trying not to stare at Trini who, as always, wandered in and out, listening to everyone.

Lupe kept looking at Trini, too. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the little woman seemed abstracted, her amber eyes fogged by some inward weather. Unable to take a proper interest in the discussion of Ethel's new Simplicity pattern, Lupe sat down in a lounge chair near the step and waited for Trini to tackle Davis. Trini always tackled newcomers. She said it was part of her job.

Sure enough, she skipped over (Trini always skipped, or bounded, as if her feet pushed too hard against the ground and shot her into the air at each step), nibbling pale green grapes off the stem, and bounced onto the foot of Lupe's lounge. "Hi, y'all. How you doing?"

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"Fine." Davis watched her guardedly out of the tops of his eyes. "How're you?"

"Oh, reckon I'll make it through the day." Lupe was sure she wasn't imagining that unaccustomed distance in her face. "Ain't much left of it. Nothing like a party after eight hours of house cleaning."

Davis swallowed this bait, unprotesting. "I thought Chip and Russ told me you were—uh—an anthropologist."

Trini swallowed a grape and smiled at him, not quite as perkily as usual. "That's right. Cleaning houses in an alien culture is fascinating work. Besides, I need something to live on, and it's hard to get a really prestigious job without a green card."

"I can see that," said Davis, still eyeing her warily. "Don't you have a grant or something?"

"I got back pay piling up, but did you ever try to cash an off-planet check around here? They sent me down with some equipment and imitation Earth artifacts that'd be easy to hock, and after that I was on my own." Trini ate a grape. Lupe knew that she would be asking Davis about his work as soon as she swallowed, so she stepped in first.

"Danny showed me an article today, about some blue people in New York. Had you heard about that?"

Trini's cheeks flushed a deeper blue, and her accent thickened. "It got into the papers down here? Dammit, I told them this would happen! We shouldn't've tried to infilitrate New York without knowing more about it. But those morons up in placement kept taking the city at its own valuation—they think it's the fountain of culture on earth, or some garbage like that, and now a perfectly good scholar's dead in the morgue, having his anatomy hauled out and whistled over by coroners! So now we got publicity, and the same people that sent him in to be killed are telling the rest of us we have to pull out."

"Pull out? You're not going away, are you, Trini?" Chip looked up from the barbecue, his eyes red with smoke.

"You bet I'm not," Trini declared. "I'm doing good work here. They got no business to yank me."

Flower shook her head. "I don't know, Trini. Bureaucrats think they can get away with anything."

"My department head's backing me up." She frowned. "Every time I've tried to talk to him in the last three days he's been out of the office, but Dr. Gralus doesn't make empty promises. Besides, this is the only project. Earth's our first intelligent-contact planet. If we go now, it's the same as retiring. We'd be studying kinship patterns among the isolated Burshkhan tribes the rest of our natural lives."

"They're sending everybody home because one of you died up in New

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York?" asked Lupe, wondering what schizophrenic use this story could serve.

"Ligstan dying was just the excuse," said Trini. "It's partly politics—"

"It would be," said Flower darkly.

"—and partly field conditions. After all, we're pretty conspicuous here, even without free publicity from homicides and muggers. Everyone we've put down in Eastern Europe got arrested, and we had to go rescue them and scrap that part of the project. Not all the selections for Third World assignments were wise, and not all our immunizations took, so we've had a couple of deaths there. When the program started up, space exploration was a big deal—very popular. Now we've got a different administration and the public's lost interest." She shrugged and finished her grapes. "But I'm interested, whether anyone else is or not, and I'm staying."

"Good," said Rose. "We'd miss you a lot."

"We'd miss your stereo, anyway," laughed Russ.

"All right. Who wants the first hot dogs?" called Chip. "Not you, Alec! Down!"

Davis sat bewildered amid the conversation, with a faintly desperate expression like that Danny sometimes wore around the tenants. As Trini went after a hot dog, he leaned forward between Lupe and Rose and asked softly: "Is this—uh—is all this for real? I mean—y'all don't really think she's from another planet, do you?"

"Why not?" smiled Rose brightly. "Flower is."

"I heard that!" The ex-hippie rattled her wok lid.

"Who cares if she is or not?" asked Lupe. "She's a funny color, but the things she says aren't much stranger than Jake looking for the Lost Bowie Mine every summer, or Ethel talking about the Communist Plot."

"Nobody here can throw stones," said Rose. "Look at me, now. To you, I look normal. I am normal. But a personnel manager, he sees grand mal epilepsy on my health record, and right away he decides I'm retarded or something."

"Or Chip and me," Russ agreed, passing with a laden plate. "He lost a job once because he fell for me."

"But—you're all normal. Being gay, epilepsy—everybody knows that doesn't make any difference. That stuff about being an alien anthropologist is really weird."

Lupe shrugged. "Who's everybody? Who's normal? Believe me, we all look weird to somebody. I found that out a long time ago, and decided not to care any more. That's how Trini wound up here. Three trailer parks turned her away because they decided she was crazy and couldn't hold a job. My boy Danny says I should've too, but her rent's always on time."

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"That's how most of us wound up here, matter of fact," said Rose. "She gets all the reliable oddballs."

Trini returned with a full paper plate and a cup of Coke. "Sorry I got kind of worked up there," she said. "I hadn't even been going to mention it, but I feel better now."

"What I wonder," said Rose, "excuse me if this is a personal question, but you been here three years without a vacation. Don't you ever want to take off and go see your family?"

"That's no more personal than some of the questions I ask you." Trini visibly considered her answer as she munched a mouthload of hot dog. "I don't want a vacation. I love my work, and I love this place. You've no idea how restful San Antonio is after my home town. By your standard's it's big and busy, I know, but you haven't seen the place where I'm from. And the kinship system in my native country—well, I'd rather not talk about that in any detail just now, but suffice to say I don't have what you mean when you say family. The chief things I miss are some flowers I used to be real fond of, and a couple of recipes you don't have the ingredients for here, and men the right height. So I don't have any real reason to go back." She looked at Davis, and her eyes were as clear and sharp as ever. "You always this quiet, or only around crazy people?"

"I—uh—I—" Davis stammered and flushed red. The mist had burned off, and Trini was back on the job. Lupe wondered just what she did believe about the woman. Her story was so silly, on the face of it; yet so many circumstances supported it, and except for that single coherent peculiarity, she didn't act insane. Lupe's indiscriminate rental policy had led her to accommodate quite a few mentally unbalanced people, few of whom had ever stayed for two consecutive months. Trini had none of that vague, furtive air, that desperation to fit every trifling occurrence into a personal reality, that she had come to recognize as characteristic. Then there was the article, and the sound system, and—well, she didn't know. What difference did it make? She went after a fajita and some barbecued chicken, dismissing the matter from her mind.

Jane Oliver had sung her share of the tape, darkness had come down, the children had gone in, and the last of the food was growing cold in a heap on the picnic table, when Danny finally showed up. Lupe, dancing the "Tennessee Waltz," saw him over Jake's shoulder and waved, before seeing the two dark dwarfs accompanying him. She faltered, missed a beat, and got her toes stepped on.

"Sorry."

"S'all right. Would you look at that?"

Lorne had seen them too, and wheeled his chair to face them. Trini, perched unselfconsciously in his lap, followed his eyes and fell silent. "You know those folks, Munchkin?" he asked.

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Trini slid down, her skirt trailing after her. "Yeah. 'Scuse me."

Alec growled, and Chip seized his collar. Danny led them into the pale yellow party lights, the soft, shiny fabric of their clothing fluttering oddly in the night breeze. The man was shorter than Trini, with the same cerulean complexion, but his hair and eyes were dark. The woman was various shades of indigo, except for her wide, pale eyes, like the full moon reflected in two glasses of beer. Their expressions were still and stern; their movements uncannily light.

Tanya Tucker started to sing the "San Antonio Stroll," but no one moved—only those two, pushing into the lot as if they owned it. Alec growled, his toenails scrabbling on the concrete.

Ethel recovered first, prepared by decades of instant Southern hospitality. "Why, looky here," she said brightly, stepping forward as if they were a couple of relatives dropped by without warning. "I bet y'all came to see Trini. She'll be so pleased to see you. Why, I bet she just longs for the sight of another blue face. I often think, you know, how ugly we must look to her! I'm Ethel Roth, her near neighbor. Can I get y'all some Cokes or anything?"

The strangers allowed their hands to be shaken. "Thank you, no," said the woman, in a rapid, guttural voice that seemed to come from deeper in the diaphragm than Trini's. "We have come for Dr. Zatrini Fulan Baranstar."

Danny made a helpless gesture. Alec barked, straining against Chip. Trini stepped forward into the middle of the yard, standing small, solid, and alone to face them. The music pulsed cheerfully around her. "I'm here. What brings you to this neck of the planet?"

The man replied with a series of guttural snarls, grunts, and pops. Trini frowned.

"If you don't have enough English or Spanish to be polite to my neighbors, Dr. Horis, you shouldn't be here."

"You know why we are come, Dr. Fulan," said the woman. "Assemble your things, and stop being stubborn."

"I like being stubborn, Dr. Jurats," said Trini.

"You tell 'em, Munch!" Russ applauded. A cold stare from those full-moon eyes silenced him.

"We understand how you feel," said Dr. Horis. "No one wishes to abandon the project. We have no choice."

"Maybe you don't. I do. I like it here, I'm doing good work, and I'm staying."

"If you rely on Dr. Gralus's influence, you should know that he is—reassigned." Dr. Jurats dwelt ominously on this last word.

Trini flinched. "The Pits?"

"Yes."

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"That settles it, then. I can't go back."

"You must. We will not inform on you."

"Look," said Flower, venturing a step or two forward. "You don't own her. Just accept her resignation and scram, all right?"

"But we do own her," said Dr. Horis. "Do not interfere where you do not understand."

This was more than flesh and blood could bear. "You're the ones that don't understand," said Lupe harshly, stepping up behind Trini and folding her arms. "Slavery is illegal in this country. She's free as long as she stays here, and you can't come barging into my trailer court ordering her around. If you want her back, you go to Washington."

"Do not interfere where you do not understand," repeated Dr. Horis.

"It's not slavery, exactly," said Trini, hastily soothing. "And it's not them. It's the University, and then the Ruler. We all belong to him, sort of. The concept doesn't translate well. But Lupe's right about one thing—" she turned her bright, piercing eyes on her colleagues. "None of that means diddly-squat here. You want directions to Washington?"

Moon-eyes flashed round the watching faces. "We should talk privately."

"Don't go anywhere with them," said Rose. "They'll grab you and beam up, or something."

Trini smiled perfunctorily. "Don't worry. I won't."

Dr. Jurats stepped forward, extending her hand. "Fulan, stop it. We may all be in trouble if you stay. The new Ruler ends all space programs. Declared personal policy." Lupe saw Trini's face change two or three times in the space of a minute, her hands clenching. "You have no status. Come home."

Trini licked her lips and made a small choking sound. "I am home. You don't need to tell anyone outside the University you left me here. You can't tell me the Ruler knows I exist."

"You disobey," said Dr. Horis accusingly.

"Yes, I do!" snapped Trini. "You could too, if you had more—more cultural objectivity! It makes as much sense for us to be revolted by disobeying, as for these people to be revolted by ritual cannibalism."

"Don't be disgusting!" exclaimed Flower.

"Each person follows his cultural imperatives," said Dr. Jurats. "They cannot eat funeral flesh. We cannot disobey the Ruler."

"Each person follows his conscience and brain," said Trini, as if shoving the words out of her mouth. "I change cultures."

Dr. Horis said something in that grunting, popping language and bounded toward the sound system. "Hey!" cried Russ, as Tanya cut off in mid-note. Jake, the closest, grabbed the long collar of the alien garment.

"You leave that be and mind your manners!"

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Simultaneously, Dr. Jurats stepped toward Trini, but Chip released Alec's collar and she found herself faced by ninety pounds of growling German shepherd. A line formed behind the little tenant; Davis hesitated, and came to stand nervously between Russ and Chip. Jake lifted Dr. Horis off his feet.

"Let go of me!"

"What about it, Munchkin?" Jake looked at her.

"If either of y'all try to hurt her, we'll stomp you flat," said Lorne, rolling his wheelchair threateningly.

"Set him down," said Trini. "No call for violence."

Jake lowered him and released his grip.

"I think it's time y'all two got a move on," said Lupe into the brittle silence.

"We will not leave without Dr. Fulan," said Dr. Jurats, her eyes on Trini's over the dog's lowered head.

"I don't think you understood my mother." Danny left his position by the gate at last. "She owns this place. If she wants you off, you get off."

"You want me to call the police?" offered Rose.

Lupe smiled determinedly. "That won't be necessary. I'm sure these folks are just going."

"Zatrini, please," said Dr. Jurats, adding something like the complaint of a lonesome dog.

Trini shook her head. "You better go now. It'd be real awkward for you to be arrested for trespassing."

"You still have the equipment," said Dr. Horis.

"Let her keep it," said Dr. Jurats abruptly. "In lieu of back pay."

"But—"

"It may be useful to get in touch with her again. We won't be able to do that if we restrict her to local technology. But you must never broadcast—never. Record keeping only. And if we return in your lifetime, it's the Pits for you, at best. No one will try to save you."

Trini nodded. Dr. Jurats turned on her heel and said something sharp and gravelly to Dr. Horis. Granting all present a look of contemptuous disgust, he followed her out. Trini sat down suddenly on the ground, trembling.

Lupe knelt and held her. "It's all right."

"N-no it's not. Oh, Lupe, you don't know what I just did!"

"You struck a blow for freedom," declared Flower. "You should be proud of yourself."

"Would you be proud if you'd roasted your best friend at his funeral and ate him with ketchup?" snapped Trini. "That wasn't a random analogy. We do that, and it's right. But this—I can't believe I just did that.

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It's—oh God Buddha Jesus! And now—now I'll be alone, always. . . ." She hid her head in Lupe's shoulder.

"You're not alone, Trini," said Danny unexpectedly. "You'll always have us."

Trini made an inarticulate sound, which might have been a moan, or a word in her native tongue. Lupe felt the muscular effort the small body made to pull spirit together, straighten, and look around, blinking, at the cluster of concerned faces around her. "Yes. Of course. I have y'all. I'll—I'll be just fine. Of course I will. I—I don't think I'll be much good for parties anymore tonight, but you can keep the—the sound system till morning. I'll come disconnect it before work. Right now, I think—I ought—it would be better—"

"I need to get to bed, myself," said Lorne. "Want a lift?"

Trini rose. "That's kind of you," she said, her voice nearly normal, but her eyes wide and flat. "Thank you very much. Night, all." She climbed into Lorne's lap and they wheeled away into the tree-rustling, bulb-spotted night.

"You got some weird friends, man," said Davis to Russ.

The party broke up. No one knew quite what to say. Danny gathered up a plate of chicken and potato salad for his supper, and escorted his mother back to their trailer. They were at the door before he spoke.

"They pulled up right there." He pointed at a nondescript section of curb. "Weirdest car you ever seen. Oval, like the Munchkin Egg."

"So. What do you think now?" asked Lupe.

"I think I better be nicer to Trini." Danny turned his face up to the sky, black and barely stardusted above the court's lights. "She put herself through a lot, just because she liked us. It's not fair not to like her back. Whether any of it's real or not. And she's never been late on the rent, like I thought she'd be. Not once."

Lupe put her hand on her son's shoulder, and they went inside.●

LUCIFER

Turning and turning,
He falls fair
Into the morning,
Below God's laughter;
Feathers like fingers
Clutching the air,
Dragging and dragging
Fell night after.

—Jane Yolen

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PROFESSIONALS

by Michaelene Pendleton

The author of this gripping future-war tale has had a story published in *Omni*, and is at work on a novel. Ms. Pendleton is the director of the Grand County Convention Bureau in Moab, Utah, and a 1988 graduate of Clarion West. "Professionals" is her first tale for *IAsfm*.

Brant crouched in the shade of an outcropping of yellow rock. Even with the sleeves cut out of his tunic, he was cooking in the damn regulation uniform and gear. Jumped from a subarctic planet to a desert war with the quartermaster's ship a jump behind. Short on ordnance with the company at just over half-strength. Typical.

Heat waves shimmered imaginary movement in his field of vision. When he turned his head, his comp lenses shifted over into infrared. He thumped them with his knuckles to bring the spectrum back into daylight mode. The equipment *used* to work right, a few planets back.

There was nothing out there. Just bare rock canyon walls, and sand. A few thorn-spiked gray bushes had escaped the chemical defoliant clusters. But no enemy.

Whoever the enemy *was*, this time. Another ground war to take a planet that the enemy would take back the next time. Brant had lost track. There was always another planet and another enemy.

Skill was what mattered. Being the best recon man in the company. Being a *professional*. Staying alive from one jump to the next. Enough food and something to drink. Recdrugs when he was off the line. Shore leave with combat pay in his pocket. The pride of serving in an elite command.

Brant scanned movement. He hunched himself smaller, tucked the hot plastic rifle stock into his shoulder. Fifty meters up the canyon a spot of reflected sunlight danced on a dark overhang of rock. Brant brought it into close focus in his rifle scope. Tracing back the angle of deflection, he studied a hump of yellow-gray rubble.

Not much there, but enough for a man to hide behind. Brant faded

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back, putting rock between himself and the enemy that his gut told him was out there. The old adrenalin rush. Stay sharp. Move.

He angled behind the boulder and bellied down into a crack in the blasted rockface. With the rifle in the crook of his elbows, Brant crawled along the cut. Sharp pebbles cut his knees. Sweat blurred his vision. Every few meters he stopped, mouth open, listening and hearing nothing but the rush of his own blood in his ears.

The cut pinched closed. Brant dragged matted hair out of his eyes and eased a look over the lip of rock. Across the canyon, the light still played its giveaway game. He could see the backside of the jumbled rockpile. Letting his focus go loose, he searched for the odd shape, the line that didn't fit, the shadow in the wrong place. Patient, he crouched and watched while the white sun burned through his uniform.

A ridge of sand became sand-colored cloth. A dark patch became a boot. Still no movement. Brant waited through the muscle cramps and the urge to make something happen.

The boot twitched. Alive, then. Do it fast and do it quiet. He checked the ready light on his rifle and thumbed off the safety. He bailed out of the cut, running silently, dodging through thornbrush and boulders, across the dry wash in the canyon floor, up behind the body lying prone in the sand. Finger tight on his weapon's trigger, Brant didn't fire.

The body in his sights looked more like a mudrat farmer than a soldier. The mismatched uniform was threadbare with ragged seams, the boots were worn thin. The rifle was a battered old Stenn with tape wrapped around a cracked plastic stock, twenty years out of date. Brant didn't recognize the shoulder patch.

Just some asshole playing soldier. Shined brass. No cap and no water bottle. Just lying there on the sand, shivering. Brant stuck a foot under the body and heaved it over.

The man was limp, his eyes rolled back into his head. Brant could feel the warmth radiating from his dry skin.

Out from the heat. So cut his throat and be done with it. Brant laid his knife to the man's neck. The man's skin was soft, a few wisps of new beard straggling down from the jawline. He had a delicate snubnosed face, unlined by time or experience, capped by baby-fine blond hair.

With the knife's point bringing a drop of blood under the man's ear, Brant couldn't finish the stroke. This wasn't a soldier, it was a *kid*, a sick mudrat way out of his league. An amateur playing soldier and dying alone in the desert.

Brant pulled his comp lenses off, wiped sweat out of his eyes, and called himself a fool in several languages. Dragging the man into a thin patch of shade under the rock overhang, he stripped off the man's dry tunic and replaced it with his sweat-damp one. He poured water on the man's

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hair and face then held his bottle to the cracked mouth. The man turned his head away from the water. Brant clamped one arm around the man's head and dribbled water onto his lips. This time the man tried to swallow.

Brant doled out drops of water, squatting until his knees ached. The man finally stopped shivering. His eyes focused, wavered out, then came back. He took in the double flash insignia on Brant's gray field cap and the regimental number tattooed on Brant's cheek. The eyes, a cloudy blue, went flat. Brant felt the man's lax muscles tighten. He palmed his knife. "Don't do it."

The voice was as young as the face. "You're Fleet. Why don't you kill me?" It was a whisper, but Brant could hear the quiver in it.

"That's a good question. Don't push it. What unit are you with?"

The eyes went stubborn. "Callan, SN43715."

"Don't give me that shit. What unit and where?"

Callan shook his head, pale hair flopping into his face.

Brant backed off and grabbed his rifle. "You can tell me or you can tell the captain. It would go easier to tell me, but that's your choice. Get up."

Callan tried. He folded his long legs and pushed off the ground. About halfway up, he went limp and collapsed.

"Shit," Brant said. He felt the sun through the neck flap of his cap. It was worse on his bare back. "I ought to leave you here to die, you dumbshit."

Callan mumbled something and curled up. Brant shook him, then slapped him. Callan was out.

Brant punched in the satellite scan code on his wrist tracer and keyed to scramble. The speaker crackled and fizzed with static, then cleared. "Daycode Valhalla: access tactical, coordinates blue grid 631, red vector 7. Request surface pickup."

A voice garbled something back at him, then faded into background hiss. Brant recoded and repeated his message. This time the speaker gave him nothing but dead air. He tried the company's call sign. Nothing. So the damned satellite link was down again. He looked at the mudrat and thought about the distance back to camp and the broken terrain and the heat. Easier to let the kid die. Except that it felt like murder.

Brant changed shirts with the kid again, then slung the old Stenn and his own rifle over one shoulder and got Callan over the other. He staggered trying to lift the weight. The rawboned mudrat was heavier than he looked.

He didn't get any lighter. Halfway back to basecamp, Brant dropped him and took a breather. Callan lay where he fell. Brant squatted beside the kid and tried his tracer again, expecting nothing from the satellite link and getting exactly that.

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He raised his hand and gave the finger to the useless orbiting hunk of junk that was supposed to be a ground troop's lifeline to the huge warships that were too expensive to risk in actual combat. Fleet and the enemy—whichever enemy—had an agreement to keep war out of space. Brant didn't give a shit. There was no question that humans were cheaper than hardware, after all. But Fleet could at least show a little respect and keep the goddamned equipment working. The company hadn't even had standard battle armor for the last few planets.

Brant drank the last of his water, panting in the blast-furnace air. He fumbled through his belt pack, found his medkit. Clumsy-fingered, his vision blurring, he picked out two slammers and stuck the tiny white pills under his tongue.

The stimulant kicked in. Brant straightened, his muscles going fluid and strong. He hoisted Callan up, got the dead weight balanced, and took off at a jog. The slammers would give him an hour, max.

He made it, but he was weaving and stumbling when the outpost sentry took Callan's weight off his shoulder. Brant's knees gave out. He flopped down and gulped air. Somebody handed him a water bottle and he tried not to drain it.

Then Sheng was there, kneeling between him and Callan, slapping a medpatch on his shoulder, peeling back his eyelids, checking his pulse. Brant managed a grin. "Am I going to live, doc?"

"Until you die, smartass. Which may not be long, you pull another stunt like this. How many slammers?"

"Two."

"You're off duty till tomorrow morning, then. I'll tell Reyes. Who's this lump of shit?" Sheng turned his narrowed gaze to Callan.

"Prisoner for interrogation. Found him a couple of hours out. Look at his unit insignia."

Sheng fingered the patch on Callan's shoulder."C4LG? Never heard of it."

"Right. It's got to be some kind of militia. They're sending us against amateurs."

"No way."

"You tell *me*. Does he look like any regular you ever saw? How old do you think he is? Look at that rifle. Stenns were phased out before I joined up."

"So he picked it up somewhere. You know the regs as well as I do."

"Yeah. And what they say is that Fleet units can't be sent into local disputes. I don't like it. Fighting regulars is one thing. But I didn't join up to fight dumbass mudrats too young to know what they're doing."

"What the hell do you care? We get paid the same."

Brant looked at the faces of the company gathered around him. Hard

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faces, hard eyes. Stripped down to field gear, they still pinned their citations on their shirts. Their clothes were dirty, their hair was ragged, and they stank.

But their *weapons* were clean. They were good at what they did; and when they went on shore leave, they didn't take any shit from anybody. They were Fleet.

Brant said, "It's not right. You don't send professionals against amateurs. Shit, as far as I can tell, we don't even have an objective on this jump. This is a goddamned wasteland. There's nothing out here worth fighting for."

"Bag it," Sheng said. "Captain's coming."

Brant shut his mouth. Their commander of two years, Hilbrant, had been replaced just before they groundsided. Reyes, the new captain, was academy and on the way up. Even in the field, his boots were shined. His *aide's* boots were shined. He would have shined up the whole company if they'd have let him. Brant had served under better officers, and a few worse. Reyes was just marking his time in grade before getting a staff posting.

Brant managed to stand up and sketch a salute.

Reyes snapped his own hand to capbrim. "Report."

"Name's Callan, sir. I found him about four clicks up ahead. He was too far gone to interrogate. I called for a pickup, but I couldn't raise the scan sat."

"Goddamn link has been down for six hours," someone said.

"That's enough of that," Reyes said. "Sheng, can you get him talking?"

The medic shook his head. "Not if you want sense out of him. He needs time, rest, and fluids. His electrolytes are royally screwed. Sir."

"How long?" Reyes asked.

"Say fifteen hours. Say morning."

Reyes nodded. "That will do. Brant, you found him, you're in charge of him. Report to me at first light. After I've interrogated him, get rid of him."

"Get rid of him?"

"You hard of hearing, Brant?"

"No, sir. You're telling me to kill an unarmed prisoner."

"Fleet orders, Brant. HQ isn't wasting air support on prisoner evac. Anybody under staff rank is expendable."

Expendable. Brant felt the cold edge of anger slice through his exhaustion, felt his muscles tense.

Sheng grabbed his arm. "Let it go," he muttered. Brant shook him off.

Reyes shouted, "We've got enemy contact in this sector. Satellite scan is still down, so keep your eyes open. Stay sharp."

"Captain," Brant said, "I got a question."

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"Let's hear it."

"Who are we fighting?"

Reyes stared at him. "We're fighting who we're *told* to fight. You have a problem with that?"

"Yes, sir. If this is one of our own planets, and that kid is untrained local militia, I have a problem with it."

Reyes' face closed down. "You just shut up and follow orders, soldier, or you'll have a problem with *me*."

"If that's what it takes, Captain." Brant felt the company tighten up around them. "I just want to know if we're fighting enemy regulars, or if we've been dropped into some local shit pile. What's our objective?"

"That's none of your goddamned business. Do your job. Leave the thinking to Fleet."

"Sir. Regulations clearly state—"

"Don't quote regulations at *me*, Brant. We fight where we're sent to fight and *who* we're sent to fight. That's the end of it."

"No, sir, that isn't the end of it. That kid is clearly not a professional soldier. That means he's got to be planetary militia. What kind of war are we fighting?"

Reyes's face went red. His hand came to rest on his sidearm. "You don't like this war, I can find you another assignment real quick. You're on report. Turn in your weapon."

Brant felt the company vibrate like stretched wire. He heard the pop-pop-pop as someone's pulse cannon powered up. Eye to eye with Reyes, Brant saw fear in the set of the captain's face. Out of his element. Desperate. And if he cracked, the whole company would crack with him. Brant backed off. "That's not necessary, Captain," he said quietly.

Reyes took the out. "All right. Rescind that order. But I don't want any more trouble from you. Get that?"

Sheng looked at the captain's retreating back. "Brant, you're a dumbshit."

Brant shrugged. "Can't argue with that. But if Sector Command is using Fleet troops against our own planets, then we're no better than mercenaries."

Sheng spat through the gap between his front teeth. "What made you think we were?" He rolled Callan onto a field stretcher. "I'll get your mudrat bedded down. Go eat. I'll have Pilas check on him about midnight. He should be out of it for a while, but if I were you, I'd tie him up nice and tight just in case."

Brant sat with his back to a rock, a silver thermal blanket pulled up to his chin. The rock gave off its heat into the night air. Brant shivered. In the aftermath of too much sun and too much adrenalin, he felt chilled

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and sick. Damn desert, always frying or freezing. And no domes or personnel shelters for anyone except Reyes because Fleet was too busy ferrying brass who wanted to observe their little war to get a resupply shuttle to the ground troops.

The night was quiet. Brant could hear the rasp of sand grains being pushed around by the wind. A thorn bush scraped against rock. Someone coughed. Metal clinked. Small sounds, quickly smothered. With no sat scan to secure the perimeter, everyone was on edge.

Stars wheeled around this planet in formations strange to Brant. He leaned his head back against the rock and studied the unfamiliar patterns. Nova London's star was lost somewhere in the brilliant swarm of the Hub worlds. Not that it mattered. He hadn't been home in twelve years.

Trussed with rifle slings, Callan was a dark lump on the sand at Brant's feet. He turned over, and Brant saw his eyes open. Brant put his hand over Callan's mouth. "If you got anything to say, keep it quiet."

"Water," Callan rasped.

Brant held a bottle of plasmaSol to Callan's mouth. Callan drank and gagged. Brant chuckled. "Only the best for the ground troops."

"Tastes like piss."

"I wouldn't know," Brant said. "Doc says it's what you need."

Callan wiggled around and sat up. "You found me."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you leave me? Or kill me?"

Because you're a dumbass baby mudrat. Brant shrugged, his shoulders moving against the rock. "Captain wants to interrogate you."

The night hid Callan's expression, but from the way his body hunched inward, Brant didn't need to see it. "I'm not telling you *nothing*," Callan said.

"Fucking amateurs," Brant muttered. "Listen, dumbshit, Doc will pump you full of his happy drugs and you'll feel real good and real cooperative. You'll fall all over yourself to answer anything Reyes asks. You'll spill the name of the first girl you laid and the first fight you had and everything in your life you've ever been ashamed of. If I were you, I'd volunteer some answers before the captain asks the questions."

After a while Callan said, "What happens then?"

Brant was glad of the dark. "We aren't keeping prisoners unless they have tactical value. You important to anybody?"

Callan made a sound close to a laugh. "Nobody that counts."

Brant's jaws clenched in sudden anger. "Just what in the hell do you think you're doing out here playing soldier?"

"I *live* here. What are *you* doing here? I thought Fleet was on our side.

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You ain't nothing but strikebreakers. Interworld Mining whistled and the Fleet came wagging. I been fighting sector guard for two months."

"Two whole months, huh? How old are you?"

Callan raised his chin. "Old enough."

"You and a twenty-year-old rifle are going to whip Fleet's ass, right?"

"Been doing it."

Brant grabbed his shoulder. "Look, Callan, so maybe you've won a few skirmishes against the local sector guard. So now you think you're tough and experienced. You're feeling pretty proud of yourself. Feeling real professional." Brant's fingers tightened until Callan winced. "Shit, kid, sector guard is where they stick the dregs and the fuckups, the ones who can't make it in a line combat unit. You're dealing with Fleet regulars now. A couple of quadrant divisions, at least. We're going to roll over you and not even notice the bump."

"It ain't going to be that easy. My commander says we can take you." Callan said. His voice cracked on the last word.

Brant felt the quick heartbeats under his fingertips. "How many men have you killed, kid?"

Callan went stiff and didn't answer.

Brant drew his knife and put it in Callan's bound hands. "Here. Show me how tough you are." He leaned forward and stretched his neck, pulling down his tunic collar. "I'm your enemy. Take me out."

He waited, the night air cold on his bared skin. He heard Callan shift position. His muscles tensed as he watched for the blade to move.

Callan dropped the knife. "I can't."

"A *professional* would."

"I can't kill you. You saved my life."

"Yeah," Brant said, shrugging his tunic back into place. "And I shouldn't have. That was my mistake. You're making one now."

Callan shook his head, starlight shining off his hair. "Not here. Not like this."

"Son of a bitch," Brant said.

The black sky seemed empty with no moons in it. Lots of stars, but no moons. Somewhere around the curve of the planet, *Corona* hung in polar orbit, its bulk a point of light visible from groundside. Brant had a sudden vision of the flagship's main wardroom, warm brass and polished wood, the huge viewscreen looking like a real window into space, drinking glasses made of real glass, plump civilians in formal black caftans toasting big-assed brass in scarlet dress uniforms.

Brant itched and he smelled bad. His last bath was a distant memory. He was hungry and tired and subject to the orders of an officer who didn't know squat about groundside operations. Short of equipment and support, and nobody cared, because ground troops were *cheaper* than

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high tech hardware. Easier to replace. Just send them out to kill kids who shouldn't even be part of the game.

"Callan," Brant said, "you just got lucky."

The slings were a bitch to untie but Brant didn't want any cut ends. Callan rubbed his wrists and ankles and looked at Brant like he was expecting to be shot any minute. "Why?" he said.

Brant dug out four slammers. "Here. Put two of these under your tongue. Two more in an hour. That's all the time you've got. When those wear off, you'll go down fast." He grabbed a handful of Callan's shirt. "Listen to me, Callan. You're out of your league. You're going to get killed, and it won't mean shit. Go home."

"You're letting me *go*?"

Brant pointed. "Our perimeter is a hundred meters out, intervals of thirty meters. Our sat scan is down, so the sentries are on visuals only." He swung Callan around. "There's a blind spot over there where that gully splits down between those standing rocks. Dumbshit captain left a hole in the perimeter. You can get through if you go quiet. Don't go back to your unit. Get out of this war while you can."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Cause I like a fair fight, mudrat. And, to get personal about it, you're just no competition."

Brant didn't sleep much even after he figured that the kid had had enough time to make it out. He lay there trying not to think, because any direction his thoughts went, there was something he didn't want to think about. Knowing that the company was being used as strikebreakers, being sent in against untrained amateurs, left a bad taste in his mouth. In the cold, thin light of dawn, so did turning loose an enemy prisoner. However this thing fell out, Reyes was going to be royally pissed.

When the sun tipped the horizon, Brant got up and wandered over to the supply dump, walking soft around the slowly waking men still huddled under their thermals. He picked up a dozen charge pacs for his rifle and a plas labeled "Meal, 1 Each, Ground Troops." As he ripped the top off the plas, he heard the scream of incoming sonics.

The blasts bracketed the command dome. The shock waves slammed Brant to the ground, his ears ringing and his vision going dark. Two more explosions, and two again. Someone was screaming for a medic and Sheng wasn't answering. Projectile shells started exploding inside the perimeter.

Brant got up, running through the swirling smoke and acrid bite of chemical detonations. Dark figures were boiling out of the blind gully, yelling, weapons blazing. Brant dropped behind a rock. To his left, a

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pulse cannon whined. A knot of advancing figures went down, bodies sliced in half.

Brant felt the backwash of a sonic stream, and a slab of the canyon wall behind him collapsed. Rock shards splattered Brant's shoulder. Blood. No pain yet.

Reyes's voice, high, panicked. Shouting useless textbook orders into the mad turmoil. Brant heard the flat crack of a pulse cannon and a ground-shaking *whump!* as the enemy's sonic gun exploded.

Brant's mind clicked off. He went cold and steady, picking his shots, squeezing the trigger and seeing the dark shapes in his scope go down.

They kept coming, tossing thermite frags, sliding from rock to rock, laying down a rain of heavy weapons fire that shredded flesh and bone into strips of unrecognizable meat. There was no perimeter. Brant heard the company shouting, trying to locate each other in the swirling dust and confusion, trying to firm up, get it together, return fire.

The recoil of his weapon hammered Brant's bad shoulder. Hot plastic overrode the smell of blood and death. He fired until nobody moved in his field of vision. Just silent bodies sprawled ugly on the ground.

Brant stood up. Scattered around the camp other figures rose from their positions, slow, wavering like ghosts in the heat haze. From what seemed a long way off, Brant heard someone crying. Colors were sharp. The hot dry air tasted good. He took a deep breath and shook himself, feeling the pain in his shoulder break through the adrenalin wall.

Reyes called for the company to count in. Wondering why *that* son of a bitch had survived, Brant answered his number and threaded his way through the dead to where the remnants of the company gathered about Reyes. On the way he stopped to check out the enemy's unit patch.

White-faced and hollow-eyed, the remnants of the company stood around the captain. The company had lost thirty men. Sheng was one of them. Brant looked at what was left of the medic and wondered if the mudrat's life was worth Sheng's. Pilas took care of his shoulder and slapped a painkiller medpatch on his neck.

Reyes put him in charge of the cleanup detail.

Brant looked closely at each enemy face as he emptied their pockets and gathered their papers. He salvaged their officer's C4LG unit patch for the company's collection and put a round into each one who was still alive. The rest of the detail dragged the mangled bodies into a neat line. The bodies would lie there only until desert scavengers got to them, but Fleet regulations said that was how you did it.

Callan was still alive. He had wedged himself into a dark hole between two leaning boulders at the mouth of the blind gully. Brant almost missed seeing him. Callan's Stenn lay in the dirt. He was pale and

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sweating, his pupils gone to pinpoints, his breath shallow. Brant couldn't see any blood on him.

"You led them back here," Brant said. "Right through the hole in the perimeter. Why didn't you stay away, like I told you to?"

Callan raised his hands and let them fall. He opened his mouth and shut it. He shook his head slowly. "I thought we could take you."

Brant centered the red laser sighting dot between Callan's eyes. "Congratulations, mudrat," he said. "You just became a professional."●

CONSIDER THE AMOEBA

Life is hard if you're a blob.
Everyone thinks you're a slob.
Hostesses will seldom choose
to ask you in because you ooze

around the floor and leave a mess
and cannot fill an evening dress,
or learn to hold your tummy in
or look like you are fit and trim.

Work is hard if you're a blob.
You can't hold a steady job.,
You cannot hold anything
because your shape is altering

each time you move. Your foot becomes
your legs, your arms, your hands, your thumbs.
A blob who was your special friend
won't know you if you met again.

A blob is only protoplasm
formless, gooey, prone to spasm
violently when touched or moved
but all blobs love to be approved

for what they are: just gentlefolk
who talk, and cry, and fret and joke.
So if you think a blob's just ooze
then clearly you've not heard the news.

—Arthur E. Stamps III

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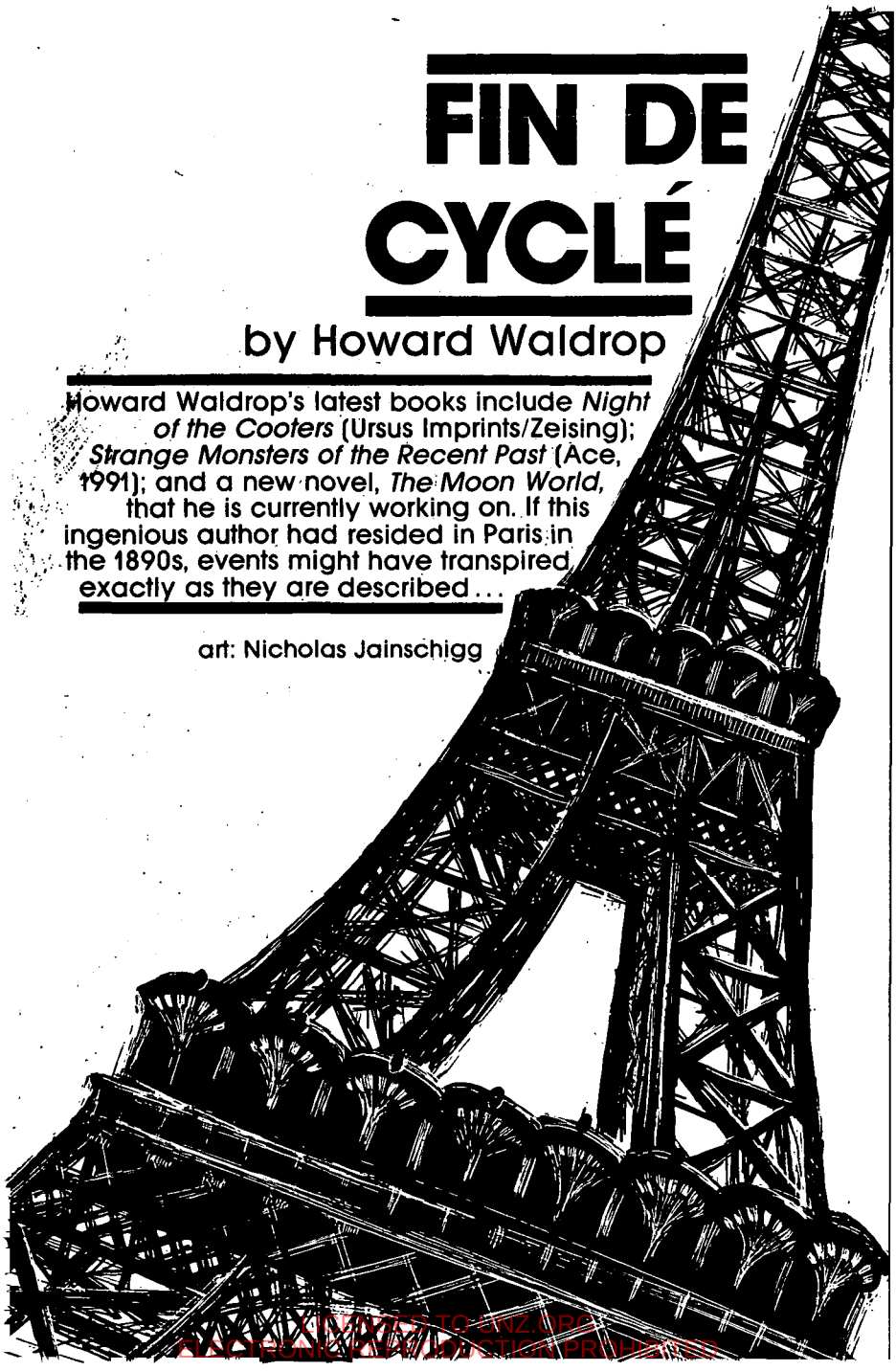
FIN DE CYCLÉ

by Howard Waldrop

Howard Waldrop's latest books include *Night of the Cooters* (Ursus Imprints/Zeising); *Strange Monsters of the Recent Past* (Ace, 1991); and a new novel, *The Moon World*, that he is currently working on. If this ingenious author had resided in Paris in the 1890s, events might have transpired exactly as they are described...

art: Nicholas Jainschigg



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I. HUMORS IN UNIFORM

A. Gentlemen, Start Your Stilts!

There was clanking and singing as the company came back from maneuvers.

Pa-chinka Pa-chinka, a familiar and comforting sound. The first of the two scouts came into view five meters in the air atop the new steam stilts. He storked his way into the battalion area, then paused.

Behind him came the second scout, then the cyclists in columns of three. They rode high-wheeled ordinaries, dusty now from the day's ride. Their officer rode before them on one of the new safety bicycles, dwarfed by those who followed behind.

At the headquarters he stopped, jumped off his cycle.

"Company! . . ." he yelled, and the order was passed back along by NCOs, " . . . company . . . company . . . company! . . ."

"Halt!" Again the order ran back. The cyclists put on their spoon-brakes, reached out and grabbed the handlebars of the man to the side. The high-wheelers stood immobile in place, 210 of them, with the two scouts standing to the fore, steam slowly escaping from the legs of their stilts.

"Company . . ." again the call and echoes, "Dis—" at the command, the leftward soldier placed his left foot on the step halfway down the spine of the bicycle above its small back wheel. The others shifted their weight backward, still holding to the other man's handlebars.

"—mount!" The left-hand soldier dropped back to the ground, reached through to grab the spine of the ordinary next to him; the rider of that repeated the first man's motions, until all three men were on the ground beside their high-wheels.

At the same time the two scouts pulled the levers beside the knees of their metal stilts. The columns began to telescope down into themselves with a hiss of steam until the men were close enough to the ground to step off and back.

"Company C, 3^{d} Battalion, 11th Bicycle Infantry, Attention!" said the lieutenant. As he did so, the major appeared on the headquarters' porch. Like the others, he was dressed in red baggy pants, blue coat, and black cap with a white kepi on the back. Unlike them, he wore white gloves, sword and pistol.

"Another mission well done," he said. "Tomorrow—a training half-holiday, for day after tomorrow, Bastille Day, the 99th of the Republic—we ride to Paris and then we roll smartly down the Champs-Élysées, to the general appreciation of the civilians and the wonder of the children."

A low groan went through the bicycle infantrymen.

"Ah, I see you are filled with enthusiasm! Remember—you are the

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finest Army in France—the Bicycle Infantry! A short ride of seventy kilometers holds no terrors for you! A mere ten kilometers within the city. An invigorating seventy kilometers back! Where else can a man get such exercise? And such meals! And be paid besides? Ah, were I a younger man, I should never have become an officer, but joined as a private and spent a life of earnest bodybuilding upon two fine wheels!"

Most of the 11th were conscripts doing their one year of service, so the finer points of his speech were lost on them.

A bugle sounded somewhere off in the fort.

"Gentlemen: Retreat."

Two clerks came out of headquarters and went to the flagpole.

From left and right bands struck up the Retreat. All came to attention facing the flagpole, as the few sparse notes echoed through the quadrangles of the garrison.

From the corner of his eye the major saw Private Jarry, already placed on Permanent Latrine Orderly, come from out of the far row of toilets set halfway out toward the drill course. The major could tell Private Jarry was disheveled from this far away—even with such a job one should be neat. His coat was buttoned sideways by the wrong buttons, one pants leg in his boots, one out. His hat was on front-to-back with the kepi tied up above his forehead.

He had his toilet brush in his hand.

The back of the major's neck reddened.

Then the bands struck up "To the Colors"—the company area was filled with the sound of salutes snapping against cap brims.

The clerks brought the tricolor down its lanyard.

Private Jarry saluted the flag with his toilet brush.

The major almost exploded; stood shaking, hand frozen in salute.

The notes went on; the major calmed himself. This man is a loser. He does not belong in the Army; he doesn't deserve the Army! Conscription is a privilege. Nothing I can do to this man will *ever* be enough; you cannot kill a man for being a bad soldier; you can only inconvenience him; make him miserable in his resolve; the result will be the same. You will both go through one year of hell; at the end you will still be a major, and he will become a civilian again, though with a bad discharge. His kind never amount to anything. Calm yourself—he is not worth a stroke—he is not insulting France, he is insulting *you*. And he is beneath your notice.

At the last note the major turned on his heel with a nod to the lieutenant and went back inside, followed by the clerks with the folded tricolors.

The lieutenant called off odd numbers for cycle-washing detail; evens were put to work cleaning personal equipment and rifles.

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Private Jarry turned with military smartness and went back into his world of strong disinfectant soap and *merde*.

After chow that evening, Private Jarry retired behind the bicycle shop and injected more picric acid beneath the skin of his arms and legs.

In three more months, only five after being drafted, he would be released, with a medical discharge, for "chronic jaundice."

B. Cannons In The Rain

Cadet Marcel Proust walked into the company orderly room. He had been putting together his belongings; today was his last full day in the Artillery. Tomorrow he would leave active duty after a year at Orleans.

"Attention," shouted the corporal clerk as he came in, "At ease," said Marcel, nodding to the enlisted men who copied orders by hand at their desks. He went to the commanding officer's door, knocked. "*Entrez.*" said a voice and he went in.

"Cadet Proust reporting, *mon capitaine,*" said Marcel, saluting.

"Oh, there's really no need to salute in here, Proust," said Captain Dreyfus.

"Perhaps, sir, it will be my last."

"Yes, yes," said Captain Dreyfus. "Tea? Sugar?" The captain indicated the kettle. "Serve yourself." He looked through some papers absent-mindedly. "Sorry to bring you in on your last day—sure we cannot talk you into joining the officers corps? France has need of bright young men like you!—No, I thought not. Cookies? Over there, Madame Dreyfus baked them this morning." Marcel retrieved a couple, while stirring the hot tea in his cup.

"Sit, sit. Please!" Dreyfus indicated the chair. Marcel slouched into it.

"You were saying?" he asked.

"Ah! Yes. Inspections coming up, records, all that," said the captain. "You remember, some three months ago, August 19th to be exact, we were moving files from the old headquarters across the two quadrangles to this building? You were staff duty officer that day?"

"I remember the move, *mon capitaine*. That was the day we received the Maxim gun tricycles, also. It was—yes—a day of unseasonable rain."

"Oh? Yes?" said Dreyfus. "That *is* correct. Do you remember, perhaps, the clerks having to take an alternate route here, until we procured canvas to protect the records?"

"They took several. Or am I confusing that with the day we exchanged barracks with the 91st Artillery? That also was rainy. What is the matter?"

"Some records evidently did not make it here. Nothing important, but

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they must be in the files for the inspection, else we shall get a very black mark indeed."

Marcel thought. Some of the men used the corridors of the instruction rooms carrying files, some went through the repair shops. There were four groups of three clerks to each set of cabinets. . . .

"Which files?"

"Gunnery practice, instruction records. The boxes which used to be—"

"—on top of the second set of wooden files," said Marcel. "I remember them there. I do not remember seeing them *here*. . . I am at a total loss as to how they could not have made it to the orderly room, *mon capitaine*."

"They were checked off as leaving, in your hand, but evidently, we have never seen them again."

Proust racked his brain. The stables? The instruction corridor; surely they would have been found by now. . . .

"Oh, we'll just have to search and search, get the 91st involved. They're probably in *their* files. This army runs on paperwork—soon clerks will outnumber the generals, eh, Proust?"

Marcel laughed. He drank at his tea—it was lemon tea, pleasant but slightly weak. He dipped one of the cookies—the kind called a madeleine—in it and took a bite.

Instantly a chill and an aching familiarity came over him—he saw his grandmother's house in Balbec, an identical cookie, the same kind of tea, the room cluttered with furniture, the sound of his brother coughing upstairs, the feel of the wrought iron dinner table chair against the back of his bare leg, his father looking out the far kitchen window into the rain, the man putting down the burden, heard his mother hum a tune, a raincoat falling, felt the patter of raindrops on the toolshed roof, smelled the tea and cookie in a second overpowering rush, saw a scab on the back of his hand from eleven years before . . .

"*Mon capitaine!*" said Marcel, rocking forward, slapping his hand against his forehead. "Now I remember where the box was left!"

II. BOTH HANDS

Rousseau was painting a tiger.

It was not just any tiger. It was the essence of tiger, the apotheosis of *felis horribilis*. It looked out from the canvas with yellow-green eyes through which a cold emerald light shone. Its face was beginning to curve into a snarl. Individual quills of whiskers stood out from the black and gold jaws in rippling lines. The edge of the tongue showed around lips with a faint edge of white. A single flower, its stem bent, was the only thing between the face of the tiger and the viewer.

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Henri Rousseau put down his brush. He stepped back from the huge canvas. To left and right, birds flew in fright from the charging tiger. The back end of a water buffalo disappeared through the rank jungle at the rear of the canvas. Blobs of grey and tan indicated where the rhinoceros and impala would be painted in later. A huge patch of bamboo was just a swatch of green-gold; a neutral tan stood in for the unstarted blue sky.

A pearl-disk of pure white canvas, with tree limbs silhouetted before it, would later be a red-ocher sun.

At the far back edge of the sky, partially eclipsed by a yellow riot of bananas, rose the newly completed Eiffel Tower.

Rousseau wiped his hand against his Rembrandt beret. His eyes above his greying spade beard and mustache moved back and forth, taking in the wet paint.

Pinned to one leg of the easel was a yellowed newspaper clipping he kept there (its duplicate lay in a thick scrapbook at the corner of the room in the clutter away from the north light). He no longer read it; he knew the words by heart. It was from a review of the showing at the Salon des Refusés two years before.

"The canvases of Monsieur Rousseau are something to be seen (then again, they're not!). One viewer was so bold to wonder with which hand the artist had painted this scene, and someone else was heard to reply: 'Both, sir! Both hands! And both feet!' "

Rousseau walked back to the painting, gobbed his brush three times across the palette, and made a two centimeter dot on the face of the tiger.

Now the broken flower seemed to bend from the foul breath of the animal; it swayed in the hot mammal wind.

Rousseau moved on to another section of the painting.

The tiger was done.

III. SUPPER FOR FOUR

Three young men walked quickly through the traffic of Paris on streets aclank with the sound of pedals, sprockets, and chains. They talked excitedly. Quadricycles and tricycles passed, ridden by women, older men, couples having quiet conversations as they pedaled.

High above them all, their heads three meters in the air, came young men bent over their gigantic wheels. They sailed placidly along, each pump of their legs covering six meters of ground, their trailing wheels like afterthoughts. They were aloof and intent; the act of riding was their life.

Occasionally a horse and wagon came by the three young men, awash

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in a sea of cyclists. A teamster kept pace with a postman on an hens-and-chickens pentacycle for a few meters, then fell behind.

There was a ringing of bells ahead and the traffic parted to each side; pedaling furiously came a police tricycle, a man to the front on the seat ringing the bell, another to the rear standing on the back pedals. Between them an abject-looking individual was strapped to the reclining seat, handcuffed and foot-manacled to the tricycle frame.

The ringing died away behind them, and the three young men turned a corner down toward the Seine. At a certain address they turned in, climbed to the third landing-and-a-half, and knocked loudly on the door.

"Enter Our Royal Chasublerie!" came the answer.

Blinking, the three tumbled into the dark room. The walls were covered with paintings and prints, woodcuts, stuffed weasels and hawks, books, papers, fishing gear and bottles. It was an apartment built from half a landing. Their heads scraped the ceiling. A huge ordinary lay on its side, taking up the whole center of the room.

"Alfred," said one of the young men. "Great news of Pierre and Jean-Paul!"

"They arrived in the Middle Orient on their world tour!" said the second.

"They've been sighted in Gaza and bombed in Gilead!" said the third.

"More bulletins soon!" said the first. "We have brought a bottle of wine to celebrate their joyous voyage."

The meter-and-a-quarter tall Jarry brushed his butt-length hair back from his face. When they had knocked, he had just finished a bottle of absinthe.

"Then we must furnish a royal feast—that will be four in all for supper?" he asked. "Excuse our royal pardon."

He put on his bicycling cap with an emblem from the far-off League of American Wheelmen. He walked to the mantelpiece, where he took down a glass of water in which he had earlier placed two hundred drops of laudanum, and ate the remains of a hashish cookie. Then he picked up his fly rod and fish basket and left, sticking his head back in to say, "Pray give us a few moments."

Two of the students began teasing one of Jarry's chameleons, putting it through an astonishing array of clashing color schemes, and then tossing one of his stuffed owls around like a football while the living one jumped back and forth from one side of its perch to the other, hooting wildly.

The second student watched through the single window.

This is what the student saw:

Jarry went through the traffic of bicycles and wheeled conveyances on the street, disappeared down the steps to the river, rigged up and made

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four casts—*Bip bap bim bom*—and came up with a fish on each one—a tench, a gudgeon, a pickerel and a trout, threw them in the basket, and walked back across the street, waving as he came.

What Jarry saw:

He was carrying a coffin as he left the dungeon and went into the roadway filled with elephants, and pigs on stilts. A bicycle ridden by a skeleton rose into the sky, the bony cyclist laughing, the sound echoing off itself, getting louder the further away it got.

He took a week getting down the twenty-seven kilometer abyss of the steps, each step a block of antediluvian marble a hundred meters wide.

Overhead, the sun was alternate bands of green and brown, moving like a newly electric-powered barber shop sign. The words "raspberryjam teapot" whispered themselves over and over somewhere just behind his right ear.

He looked into the thousand kilometer width of the river of boiling ether. The fumes were staggering—sweet and nausea-producing at the same time. A bird with the head of a Pekingese lap-dog flew by the now purple and black orb of the sun.

Jarry pulled out his whip-coach made of pure silver with its lapis-lazuli guides and its skull of a reel. The line was an anchor chain of pure gold. He had a bitch of a time getting the links of chain through the eye of his fly. It was a two-meter-long, four-winged stained glass and pewter dragonfly made by Alphonse Mucha.

Jarry false-cast into the ether, lost sight of his fly in the roiling fumes, saw a geyser of water rise slowly into the golden air. The tug pulled his arm from its socket. He set the hook.

Good! He had hooked a kraken. Arms writhing, parrot beak clacking, it fought for an hour before he regained line and pulled it to the cobbles, smashing it and its ugly eyes and arms beneath his foot. Getting it into the steamer trunk behind him, he cast again.

There were so many geysers exploding into the sky he wasn't sure which one was his. He set the hook anyway and was rewarded with a Breughel monster; human head and frog arms with flippers; it turned into a jug halfway back and ended in a horse. As he fought it he tried to remember which painting it was from; *The Temptation of St. Anthony,* most likely.

The landing accomplished, he cast again just as the planet Saturn, orange and bloated like a pumpkin, its rings whirring and making a noise like a mill-saw, fell and flattened everything from Notre Dame to the Champs de Mars. Luckily, no one was killed.

Another strike. For a second, the river became a river, the fly rod a fly rod, and he pulled in a fish, a pickerel. Only this one had hands, and

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every time he tried to unhook it, it grabbed the hook and stuck it back in its own jaw, pulling itself toward Jarry with plaintive mewling sounds.

"*Merde!*" he said, taking out his fishing knife and cutting away the hands. More grew back. He cut them away, too, and tossed the fish into the mausoleum behind him.

Better. The ether-river was back. His cast was long. It made no sound as it disappeared. There was the gentlest tug of something taking the dragonfly—Jarry struck like a man possessed.

Something huge, brown and smoking stood up in the ether fumes, bent down and stared at Jarry. It had shoulders and legs. It was the Colossus of Rhodes. A fire burned through vents in the top of its head, the flames shone out the eyes. It could have reached from bank to bank; its first stride would take it to Montmarte.

Alfred gave another huge tug. The chain going from his rod to the lip of the Colossus pulled taut. There was a pause and a groan, the sound of a ship on a reef. With a boom and a rattle, the bronze man tottered, tried to regain its balance, then fell, shattering itself on the bridges and quays, the fires turning to steam. The tidal wave engulfed the Île de la Cité and would no doubt wipe out everything all the way to the sea.

Painfully, Jarry gathered up the tons of bronze shards and put them in the wheelless stagecoach and dragged it up the attic stairs to the roadway. The bicyclists and wolverines seemed unconcerned. Saturn had buried itself below its equator. Its rings still ran, but much more slowly; they would stop by nightfall. Pieces of the bronze Colossus were strewn all over the cityscape.

Jarry looked toward the Walls of Troy before him as he struggled with the sarcophagus. At one portal he saw his friends Hannibal, Hamilcar, and Oadoacer waiting for him. If the meal weren't to their satisfaction, they were to kill and eat *him*. He put up his hand in acknowledgement of doom.

The sky was pink and hummed a phrase from Wagner, a bad phrase. The Eiffel Tower swayed to its own music, a gavotte of some kind. Jarry got behind the broken-down asphalt wagon and pushed it toward the drawbridge of despair that was the door of his building.

He hoped he could find the matches and cook supper without burning down the whole fucking city.

IV. ARTFULLY ARRANGED SCENES

Georges Méliès rose at dawn in Montreuil, bathed, breakfasted, and went out to his home-office. By messenger, last night's accounts from the Théâtre Robert-Houdin would have arrived. He would look over those,

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take care of correspondence, and then go back to the greenhouse glass building that was his Star Films studio.

At ten, the workmen would arrive. They and Méliès would finish the sets, painting scenery in shades of grey, black, and white, each scene of which bore, at some place, the Star Films trademark to discourage film footage piracy. The mechanics would rig the stage machinery, which was Méliès' forte.

At eleven the actors would appear, usually from the Folies Bergère, and Méliès would discuss with them the film to be made, block out the movements, and with them improvise the stage business. Then there would be a jolly lunch, and a free time while Méliès and his technicians prepared the huge camera.

It was fixed on a track perpendicular to the stage, and could be moved from a position, at its nearest point, which would show the actors full-length upon the screen, back into the T-shaped section of the greenhouse to give a view encompassing the entire acting area. Today, the camera was to be moved and then locked down for use twice during the filming.

At two, filming began after the actors were costumed. The film was a retelling of Little Red Riding Hood. The first scene, of the girl's house, was rolled in, accessory wings and flies dropped, and the establishing scene filmed. The actresses playing the girl and her mother were exceptionally fine. Then the next scene, of the forest path, was dropped down; the camera moved back and locked in place.

The scene opened with fairies and forest animals dancing, then the Wolf (a tumbler from the Folies) came on in a very hideous costume, and hid behind a painted tree. The forest creatures try to warn the approaching girl, who walks on the path toward the camera, then leave. She and the Wolf converse. The Wolf leaves.

The second scene requires eleven takes, minor annoyances growing into larger ones as filming progresses. A trap door needed for a later scene comes open at one point while the animals romp, causing a painted stump to fall into it.

The camera is moved once more, and the scenery for the grandmother's house is put in place, the house interior with an open window at the back. The Wolf comes in, chases the grandmother away, in continuous action, goes to the wardrobe, dresses, climbs in bed. Only then is the action stopped.

When filming begins again, with the same camera location, Red Riding Hood enters. The action is filmed continuously from this point to when the Wolf jumps from the bed. Then the Wolf chases the girl around the room, a passing hunter appears at the window, watches the action a second, runs in the door, shoots the Wolf (there is a flash powder explosion and the Wolf-actor drops through the trap door).

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The grandmother appears at the window, comes in; she, the hunter and Red Riding Hood embrace. *Fin.*

Méliès thanks the actors and pays them. The last of the film is unloaded from the camera (for such a bulky object it only holds sixteen meters of film per magazine) and taken to the laboratory building to be developed, then viewed and assembled by Méliès tomorrow morning.

Now five P.M., Méliès returns to the house, has early supper with his wife and children. Then he reads to them, and at seven P.M. performs for them the magic tricks he is trying out, shows new magic lantern transition-transfigurations to be incorporated into his stage act, gives them a puppet show or some other entertainment. He bids goodnight to his children, then returns to the parlor where he and his wife talk for an hour. Perhaps while they talk he sketches her, or doodles scene designs for his films. He tells her amusing stories of the day's filming, perhaps jokes or anecdotes from the Folies the actors have told him at lunch.

He accompanies his wife upstairs, undresses her, opens the coverlet, inviting her in. She climbs into bed.

He kisses her sweetly goodnight.

Then goes downstairs, puts on his hat, and goes to the home of his mistress.

V. WE GROW BORED

The banquet was in honor of Lugné-Poe, the manager of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

Jarry, in his red canvas suit and paper shirt with a fish painted on it for a tie, was late. The soup was already being served.

There were three hundred people, all male, attending. Alfred went to his seat; a bowl of soup, swimming with fish eyes, was placed before him. He finished it at once, as he had forgotten to eat for the last two days.

He looked left and right; to the right was a man known vaguely to him as a pederast and a *frotteur,* but whose social station was such that he would rather have swallowed the national tricolor, base, standard and spike, than to have spoken to Jarry. To the left was a shabby man, with large spade beard and mustache, wearing an artist's beret and workman's clothes. He slowly spooned his soup while deftly putting all the bread and condiments within reach into the pockets of his worn jacket.

Then Jarry looked across the table and found himself staring into the eyes of a journalist for one of the right-wing nationalist Catholic cycling weeklies.

"Are you not Jarry?" asked the man, with narrowed eyes.

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"We are," said Alfred. "Unfortunately, our royal personage does not converse with those who have forsaken the One True Means of Transportation."

"Ha. A recidivist!" said the reporter. "It is we who are of the future, while you remain behind in the lost past."

"Our conversation is finished," said Jarry. "You, and Monsieur Norpois, have lost our true salvation of the Wheel."

"Bi-cycle means two wheels," said the journalist. "When you and your kind realize that true speed, true meaning, and true patriotism depend on equal size and mighty gearing, this degenerate country will become strong once more."

The man to Jarry's left was looking back and forth from one to the other; he had stopped eating, but his left hand brought another roll to his pocket.

"Does not the First Citizen of our Royal Lands and Possessions to the East, the Lord Amida Buddha himself, speak of the Greater and Lesser Wheels?" asked Jarry. "Put *that* in your ghost-benighted, superstition-ridden censer and try to smoke it. Our Royal Patience becomes stretched. We have nothing against those grown weary, old, effete who go to three, four wheels or more; they have given up. Those, however, with equal wheels, riders of crocodiles and spiders, with false mechanical aids, we deem repugnant, unworthy; one would almost say, but would never, ever, that they have given in to . . . *German* ideas."

The conversation at the long table stopped dead. The man to Jarry's left put down his spoon and eased his chair back from the table ever so slightly.

The face of the reporter across the table went through so many color changes that Jarry's chameleon, at the height of mating season, would be shamed. The journalist reached under the table, lifted his heavy-headed cane, pushed it up through the fingers of his right hand with his left, caught it by the tip.

"Prepare yourself for a caning," said the turnip-faced man. No challenge to the field of honor, no further exchange of unpleasantries. He lifted his cane back, pushing back his sleeve.

"Monsieur," said Jarry, turning to the man on his left, "do us the honor of standing us upon our throne, here." He indicated his chair.

The man scooted back, picked up the one-and-a-quarter-meter high Jarry and stood him on the seat of his chair in a very smooth motion. Then the man grabbed his soup bowl and stood away.

"I will hammer you down much farther before I am done," said the reporter, looking Jarry up and down. People from the banquet committee rushed toward them; Lugné-Poe was yelling who was the asshole who made the seating arrangements?

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"By your red suit I take you for an anarchist. Very well, no rules," said the reporter. The cane whistled.

"By our Red Suit you should take us for a man whose Magenta Suit is being cleaned," said Jarry. "This grows tedious. We grow bored." He pulled his Navy Colt Model.41 from his waistband, cocked it and fired a great roaring blank which caught the reporter's pomaded hair on fire. The man went down yelling and rolling while others helpfully poured pitchers of water on him.

The committee members had stopped at the gun's report. Jarry held up his finger to the nearest waiter. "Check, please!" he said.

He left the hall out the front door as the reporter, swearing great oaths of vengeance and destruction, was carried back into the kitchen for butter to be applied to his burns.

Jarry felt a hand on his shoulder, swung his arm up, came around with the Colt out again. It was the man who had stood him on the chair.

"You talk with the accent of Laval," said the man.

"Bred, born, raised and bored *merdeless* there," said Jarry.

"I, too," said the man.

"We find Laval an excellent place to be *from*, if you get our royal meaning," said Jarry.

"Mr. Henri-Jules Rousseau," said the man.

"Mr. Alfred-Henri Jarry." They shook hands.

"I paint," said Rousseau.

"We set people's hair afire," said Jarry.

"You must look me up; my studio is on the Boulevard du Port-Royal."

"We will be happy if a fellow Lavalese accompanies us immediately to drink, do drugs, visit the brothels and become fast friends for life."

"Are you kidding?" said Rousseau. "They're getting ready to serve the cabbage back in there. Do look me up, though," he said, heading back in toward the banquet hall and putting his napkin back under his chin.

"We shall," said Jarry, and mounted his high-wheeler and was gone into the darkness.

VI. NEWS FROM ALL OVER

January 14, 1895 *Le Cycliste Français*
TRAITOR ON THE GENERAL STAFF!
ARREST AND TRIAL OF THE JEW CAPTAIN DREYFUS
DEGRADATION AND STRIPPING OF RANK
DEPORTATION TO GUIANA FOR LIFE

"Secrets vital to the Nation," says a General, "from which our Enemy

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will profit and France never recover. It is only the new lenient Jew-inspired law which kept the Tribunal from sentencing the human rat to Death!"

VII. LIKE THE SPOKES OF A LUMINOUS WHEEL

The reporter Norpois rode a crocodile velocipede of singular aspect. Its frame was low and elongated. The seat was at the absolute center of the bicycle's length, making it appear as if its rider were disincorporated.

Though extremely modern in that respect, its wheels were anachronisms, heavily spoked and rimmed to the uncaring eye. On a close examination it was revealed the spokes were ironwork, eight to each wheel, and over them were wrought two overlapping semicircles, one of a happy, the other of a sad, aspect of the human face.

In unison, front and back, the wheels first smiled, then frowned at the world around them as they whirled their rider along the newly macadamized roads and streets.

In his sporty cap and black knickers, Norpois seemed almost to lean between the wheels of strife and fortune. Other bicyclists paused to watch him go spoking silently by, with an almost inaudible whisper of iron rim on asphalt. The crocodile frame seemed far too graceful and quiet for the heavy wheels on which it rode.

Norpois worked for *Le Cycliste Français*. His assignments took him to many *arrondissements* and the outlying parts of the city.

He was returning from interviewing a retired general before sunset one evening, when, preparatory to stopping to light his carbide handlebar-lamp, he felt a tickle of heat at his face, then a dull throbbing at his right temple. To his left, the coming sunset seemed preternaturally bright, and he turned his head to look at it.

His next conscious thought was of picking himself and his velocipede up from the side of the road where he had evidently fallen. He noticed he was several dozen meters down the road from where he had turned to look at the sunset. His heart hammered in his chest. The knees of his knickers were dusty, his left hand was scraped, with two small pieces of gravel embedded in the skin, and he had bitten his lip, which was beginning to swell. He absently dug the gravel from his hand. He had no time for small aches and pains. He had to talk to someone.

"Jules," he said to the reporter who shared the three-room apartment with him. As he spoke he filled a large glass with half a bottle of cognac

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and began sipping at it between his sentences. "I must tell you what life will be like in twenty years."

"You, Robida, and every other frustrated engineer," said Jules, putting down his evening paper.

"Tonight I have had an authentic vision of the next century. It came to me not at first as a visual illusion, a pattern on my eyes, some ecstatic vision. It came to me first through my nose, Jules. An overpowering, oppressive odor. Do you know what the coming years smell like, Jules? They smell of burning flesh. It was the first thing to come to me, and the last to leave. Think of the worst fire you ever covered. Remember the charred bodies, the popped bones? Multiply it by a city, a nation, a hemisphere! It was like that.

"The smell came, then I saw in the reddened clouds a line of ditches, miles, kilometers upon thousands of kilometers of ditches in churned earth, men like troglodytes killing each other as far as the eye could see, smoke everywhere, the sky raining death, the sky filled with aerial machines dropping explosives; detonations coming and going like giant brown trees which sprout, leaf and die in an instant. Death everywhere, from the air, from guns, shells falling on all beneath them, the aerial machines pausing in their rain of death below only to shoot each other down. Patterns above the ditches, like vines, curling vines covered with thorns—over all a pattern formed on my retina—always the incessant chatter of machinery, screams, fire, death-agonies, men stomping each other in mud and earth. I could see it all, hear it all, above all else, smell it all, Jules, and . . ."

"Yes?"

"Jules, it was the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced."

He stared at his roommate.

"There's some cold mutton on the table," said Jules. "And half a bottle of beer." He looked back down at his paper. After a few minutes he looked up. Norpois stood, looking out the window at the last glow of twilight, still smiling.

VIII. ONE ORDINARY DAY, WITH ANARCHISTS

Alfred Jarry sailed along the boulevard, passing people and other cyclists right and left. Two and a half meters up, he bent over his handlebars, his cap at a rakish angle, his hair a black flame behind his head. He was the very essence of speed and grace, no longer a dwarfish man of slight build. A novice rider on a safety bicycle took a spill ahead of him. Jarry used his spoon-brake to stop a few centimeters short of the wide-eyed man who feared broken ribs, death, a mangled vehicle.

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Then Jarry jumped up and down on his seat, his feet on the locked pedals, jerking the ordinary in small jumps a meter to the left until his path was clear, then he was gone down the road as if nothing had happened.

Riders who drew even with him dropped back—Jarry had a carbine slung across his back, carried two bandoliers of cartridges for it on his chest, had two Colt pistols sticking from the waistband of his pants, the legs of which were tucked into his socks, knicker-fashion. Jarry was fond of saying firearms, openly displayed, were signs of peaceableness and good intentions, and wholly legal.

He turned down a side street and did not hear the noise from the Chamber of Deputies.

A man named Vaillant, out of work, with a wife and children, at the end of his tether, had gone to the Chamber carrying with him a huge sandwich made from a whole loaf of bread. He sat quietly watching a debate on taxes, opened the sandwich to reveal a device made of five sticks of the new dynamite, a fuse and blasting cap, covered with one and a half kilos of #4 nails. He lit it in one smooth motion, jumped to the edge of the gallery balcony and tossed it high into the air.

It arced, stopped, and fell directly toward the center of the Chamber. Some heard the commotion, some saw it; Dreyfussards sensed it and ducked.

It exploded six meters in the air.

Three people were killed, 47 injured badly, more than 70 less so. Desks were demolished; the speaker's rostrum was turned to wood lace.

Vaillant was grabbed by alert security guards.

The first thing that happened, while people moaned and crawled out from under their splintered desks, was that the eight elected to the Chamber of Deputies on the Anarchist ticket, some of them having to pull nails from their hands and cheeks to do so, stood and began to applaud loudly. "Bravo!" they yelled, "Bravo! Encore!"

IX. THE KID FROM SPAIN

His name was Pablo, and he was a big-nosed, big-eyed Spanish kid who had first come to Paris with his mother two years before at the age of thirteen; now he was back on his own as an art student.

On this trip, the first thing he learned to do was fuck, the second was to paint.

One day a neighbor pointed out to him the figure of Jarry tearing down

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the street. Pablo thought the tiny man on the huge bicycle, covered with guns and bullets, was the most romantic thing he had ever seen in his life. Pablo immediately went out and bought a pistol, a .22 single-shot, and took to wearing it in his belt.

He was sketching the River one morning when the shadow of a huge wheel fell on the ground beside him. Pablo looked up. It was Jarry, studying the sketch over his shoulder.

Pablo didn't know what to do or say, so he took out his gun and showed it to Jarry.

Jarry looked embarrassed. "We are touched," he said, laying his hand on Pablo's shoulder. "Take one of ours," he said, handing him a .38 Webley. Then he was up on his ordinary and gone.

Pablo did not remember anything until it was getting dark and he was standing on a street, sketchbook in one hand, pistol still held by the barrel in the other. He must have walked the streets all day that way, a seeming madman.

He was outside a brothel. He checked his pockets for money, smiled, and went in.

X. MORE BEANS, PLEASE

"Georges Méliès," said Rousseau, "Alfred Jarry."
"Pleased."
"We are honored."
"Erik Satie," said Méliès, "Henri Rousseau."
"Charmed."
"At last!"
"This is Pablo," said Satie. "Marcel Proust."
" 'Lo."
"Delighted."
"Gentlemen," said Rousseau, "Mme. Méliès."
"Dinner is served," she said.

"But of course," said Marcel, "*Everyone* knows evidence was introduced in secret at the first trial, evidence the defense was not allowed to see."

"Ah, but that's the military mind for you!" said Rousseau. "It was the same when I played piccolo for my country between 1864 and 1871. What matters is not the evidence, but that the charge has been brought against you in the first place. It proves you guilty."

"Out of my complete way of thinking," said Satie, taking another helping of calamari in aspic, "having been unfortunate enough to be a civilian all my life . . ."

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"Here, here!" they all said.

". . . but is it not true that they asked him to copy the *bordereau,* the list found in the trash at the German Embassy, and introduced *that* at the court-martial, rather than the original outline of our defenses?"

"More beans, please," said Pablo.

"That is one theory," said Marcel. "The list, of course, leaves off halfway down, because Dreyfus realized what was going to happen as they were questioning him back in December of '94."

"That's the trouble," said Rousseau. "There are too many theories, and of course, none of this will be introduced at the Court of Cassation next month. Nothing but the original evidence, and of course, the allegations brought up by Colonel Picquart, whose own trial for insubordination is scheduled month after next."

Méliès sighed. "The problem, of course, is that we shall suffer one trial after another; the generals are all covering ass now. First they convict an innocent man on fabricated evidence. Finding the spying has not stopped with the wrongful imprisonment of Dreyfus, they listen to Colonel Picquart, no friend of anyone, who tells them it's the Alsatian Esterhazy, but Esterhazy's under the protection of someone in the War Ministry, so they send Picquart off to Fort Zinderneuf, hoping he will be killed by the Rifs; when he returns covered with scars and medals, they throw him in jail on trumped-up charges of daring to question the findings of the court-martial. Meanwhile the public outcry becomes so great that the only way things can be kept at status quo is to say questioning Dreyfus' guilt is to question France itself. We can all hope, but of course, there can probably be only one verdict of the court of review."

"More turkey, please," said Pablo.

"The problem, of course," said Satie, "is that France needs to be questioned if it breeds such monsters of arrogance and vanity."

"Excuse me, Mr. Satie," said Madame Méliès, speaking for the first time in an hour. "The problem, of course, is that Dreyfus is a Jew."

She had said the thing none of the others had yet said, the thing at base, root and crown of the Affair.

"And being so," said Jarry, "We are sure, Madame, if through our actions this wronged man is freed, he will be so thankful as to allow Our Royal Person to put him upon the nearest cross, with three nails, for whatever period we deem appropriate."

"Pass the wine, please," said Pablo.

"It is a rough time for us," said Jarry, "what with our play to go into production soon, but we shall give whatever service we can to this project."

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"Agreed by all, then!" said Méliès. "Star Films takes the unprecedented step of collaborating with others! I shall set aside an *entire week,* that of Tuesday next, for the production of *The Dreyfus Affair.* Bring your pens, your brushes, your ideas! Mr. Satie, our piano at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin is at your disposal for practice and for the *première;* begin your plans now. And so, having decided the fate of France, let us visit the production facilities at the rear of the property, then return to the parlor for cigars and port!"

They sat in comfortable chairs. Satie played a medley of popular songs, those he knew by heart from his days as the relief piano player at the Black Cat; Méliès, who had a very good voice, joined Pablo and Rousseau (who was sorry he had not brought his violin) in a rousing rendition of "The Tired Workman's Song."

Jarry and Proust sat with unlit cigars in their mouths.

"Is it true you studied with Professor Bergson, at the Lycée Henri IV?" asked Marcel. "I was class of '91."

"We are found out," said Alfred. "We were class of all the early 1890s, and consider ourselves his devoted pupil still."

"Is it his views on time, on duration? His idea that character comes in instants of perception and memory? Is it his notion of memory as a flux of points in the mind that keeps you under his spell?" asked Proust.

"He makes us laugh," said Jarry.

They spent the rest of the evening, after meeting and bidding goodnight to the Méliès children, and after Madame Méliès rejoined them, playing charades, doing a quick round of Dreyfus Parcheesi, and viewing pornographic stereopticon cards, of which Georges had a truly wonderful collection.

They said their goodbyes at the front gate of the Montreuil house. Pablo had already gone, having a hot date with anyone at a certain street address, on his kangaroo bicycle; Rousseau walked the two blocks to catch an omnibus; Satie, as was his wont, strode off into the night at a brisk pace whistling an Aristide Bruant tune; he sometimes walked twenty kilometers to buy a piece of sheet music without a second thought.

Marcel's coachman waited. Jarry stood atop the Méliès wall, ready to step onto his ordinary. Georges and Madame had already gone back up the walkway.

Then Marcel made a Proposal to Alfred, which, if acted upon, would take up much physical activity and some few hours of their time.

"We are touched by many things lately," said Jarry. "We fear we grow sentimental. Thank you for your kind attention, Our Dear Marcel, but

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we must visit the theater, later to meet Pablo to paint scenery, and our Royal Drug Larder runs low. We thank you, though, from the bottom of our heart, graciously."

And he was gone, silently, a blur under each gaslamp he passed.

For some reason, during the ride back to Faubourg Ste.-Germain, Marcel was not depressed as he usually was when turned down. He, too, hummed a Bruant song. The coachman joined in.

Very well, very well, thought Proust. We shall give them a Dreyfus they will *never* forget.

XI. THE ENRAGED UMBRELLA

In the park, two days later, Marcel thought he was seeing a runaway carousel.

"Stop!" he yelled to the cabriolet driver. The brake squealed. Marcel leapt out, holding his top-hat in his hand. "Wait!" he called back over his shoulder.

There was a medium-sized crowd, laborers, fashionable people out for a stroll, several tricycles and velocipedes parked nearby. Attention was all directed toward an object in the center of the crowd. There was a wagon nearby, with small machines all around it.

What Marcel had at first taken for a merry-go-round was not. It *was* round, and it did go.

The most notable feature looked like a ten-meter-in-diameter Japanese parasol made of, Marcel guessed, fine wire struts and glued paper. Coming down from the center of this, four meters long, was a central pipe; at its bottom was a base shaped like a plumb bob. Above this base, a seat, pedals, and set of levers faced the central column. Above the seat, halfway down the pipe, parallel to the umbrella mechanism, was what appeared to be a weathervane, at the front end of which, instead of an arrow was a spiral, two-bladed airscrew. At its back, where the iron fletching would be, was a half-circle structure, containing within it a round panel made of the same stuff as the parasol. Marcel saw that it was rotatable on two axes, obviously a steering mechanism of some sort.

Three men in coveralls worked at the base; two holding the machine vertical while the third tightened bolts with a wrench, occasionally giving the pedal mechanism a turn, which caused the giant umbrella above to spin slowly.

Obviously the machine was very lightweight—what appeared to be iron must be aluminum or some alloy, the strutwork must be very fine, possibly piano wire.

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The workman yelled. He ran the pedal around with his hand. The paper-wire umbrella moved very fast indeed.

At the call, a man in full morning suit, like Marcel's, came out from behind the wagon. He walked very solemnly to the machine, handed his walking stick to a bystander, and sat down on the seat. He produced two bicyclist's garters from his coat and applied them to the legs of his trousers above his spats and patent-leather shoes.

He moved a couple of levers with his hands and began to pedal, slowly at first, then faster. The moving parasol became a flat disk, then began to strobe, appearing to move backward. The small airscrew began a lazy revolution.

There was a soft growing purr in the air. Marcel felt gentle wind on his cheek.

The man nodded to the mechanics, who had been holding the machine steady and upright. They let go. The machine stood of its own accord. The grass beneath it waved and shook in a streamered disk of wind.

The man doffed his top hat to the crowd. Then he threw another lever. The machine, with no strengthening of sound or extra effort from its rider, rose three meters into the air.

The crowds gasped and cheered. "*Vive la France!*" they yelled. Marcel, caught up in the moment, had a terrible desire to applaud.

Looking to right and left beneath him, the aeronaut moved a lever slightly. The lazy twirling propeller on the weathervane became a corkscrewing blur. With a very polite nod of his head, the man pedaled a little faster.

Men threw their hats in the air, women waved their four-meter-long scarves at him.

The machine, with a sound like the slow shaking-out of a rug, turned and moved slowly off toward the Boulevard Haussmann, the crowd, and children who had been running in from all directions, following it.

While one watched, the other two mechanics loaded gear into the wagon. Then all three mounted, turned the horses, and started off at a slow roll in the direction of the heart of the city.

Marcel's last glimpse of the flying machine was of it disappearing gracefully down the line of an avenue above the treetops, as if an especially interesting woman, twirling her parasol, had just left a pleasant garden party.

Proust and the cabriolet driver were the only persons left on the field. Marcel climbed back in, nodded. The driver applied his whip to the air.

It was, Marcel would read later, the third heavier-than-air machine to fly that week, the forty-ninth since the first of the year, the one-hundred-twelfth since man had entered what the weeklies referred to as the Age of the Air late year-before-last.

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XII. THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

The sound of hammering and sawing filled the workshop. Rousseau painted stripes on a life-sized tiger puppet. Pablo worked on the silhouette jungle foliage Henri had sketched. Jarry went back and forth between helping them and going to the desk to consult with Proust on the scenario. (Proust had brought in closely written pages, copied in a fine hand, that he had done at home the first two days; after Jarry and Méliès drew circles and arrows all over them, causing Marcel visible anguish, he had taken to bringing in only hastily worded notes. The writers were trying something new—both scenario *and* title cards were to be written by them.)

"Gentlemen," said Satie, from his piano in the corner. "The music for the degradation scene!" His left hand played heavy bass notes, spare, foreboding. His right hit every other note from "La Marseillaise."

"Marvelous," they said. "Wonderful!" They went back to their paintpots. The Star Films workmen threw themselves into the spirit wholeheartedly, taking directions from Rousseau or Proust as if they were Méliès himself. They also made suggestions, explaining the mechanisms which would, or could, be used in the filming.

"Fellow collaborators!" said Méliès, entering from the yard. "Gaze on our Dreyfus!" He gestured dramatically.

A thin balding man dressed in cheap overalls entered, cap in hand. They looked at him, each other, shifted from one foot to another.

"Come, come, geniuses of France!" said Méliès. "You're not using your imaginations!"

He rolled his arm in a magician's flourish. A blue coat appeared in his hands. The man put it on. Better.

"*Avec!*" said Méliès, reaching behind his own back, producing a black army cap, placing it on the man's head. Better still.

"*Voila!*" he said, placing a mustache on the man's lip.

To Proust, it was the man he had served under seven years before, grown a little older and more tired. A tear came to Marcel's eye; he began to applaud, the others joined in.

The man seemed nervous, did not know what to do with his hands. "Come, come, Mr. Poulvain, get used to applause," said Méliès, "You'll soon have to quit your job at the chicken farm to portray Captain Dreyfus on the international stage!" The man nodded and left the studio.

Marcel sat back down and wrote with redoubled fury.

"Monsieur Méliès?" asked Rousseau.

"Yes?"

"Something puzzles me."

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"How can I help?"

"Well, I know nothing about the making of cinematographs, but, as I understand, you take the pictures, from beginning to the end of the scenario, in series, then choose the best ones to use after you have developed them?"

"*Exactement!*" said Georges.

"Well, as I understand (if only Jarry and Proust would quit diddling with the writing), we use the same prison cell both for the early arrest scenes, and for Dreyfus' cell on Devil's Island?"

"Yes?"

"Your foreman explained that we would film the early scenes, break the backdrops, shoot other scenes, and some days or hours later reassemble the prison cell again, with suitable changes. Well, it seems to me, to save time and effort, you should film the early scenes, then change the costume and the makeup on the actor, and add the properties which represent Devil's Island, and put those scenes in their proper place when the scenes are developed. That way, you would be through with both sets, and go on to another."

Méliès looked at him a moment. The old artist was covered with blobs of grey, white and black paint. "My dear Rousseau; we have never done it that way, since it cannot be done that way in the theater. But . . ."

Rousseau was pensive. "Also, I noticed that great care must be taken in moving the camera, and that right now the camera is to be moved many times in the filming. Why not also photograph all the scenes where the camera is in one place a certain distance from the stage, then all the others at the next, and so on? It seems more efficient that way, to me."

"Well," said Méliès. "That is surely asking too much! But your first suggestion, in the interest of saving time with the scenery. Yes. Yes, we could possibly do that! Thank you . . . as it is going now, the trial may very well be over before we even *begin* filming—if someone doesn't shoot Dreyfus as he sits in court since his return from Devil's Island even *before* that. Perhaps we shall try your idea . . ."

"Just thinking aloud," said Rousseau.

"Monsieur Director?" said Marcel.

"Yes?"

"Something puzzles me."

"Yes?"

"I've seen few Lumièreoscopes—"

"That name!" said Méliès, clamping his hands over his ears.

"Sorry . . . I've seen few films, at any rate. But in each one (and it comes up here in the proposed scenario) that we have Dreyfus sitting in his cell, on one side, the cutaway set of the hut with him therein, then

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the guard walks up and pounds on the door. Dreyfus gets up, goes to the door, opens it and the guard walks in and hands him the first letter he is allowed to receive from France."

"A fine scene!" said Méliès.

"Hmmm. Yes. Another thing I have seen in all Lu—in moving pictures is that the actor is always filmed as if you were watching them on stage, their whole bodies from a distance of a few meters away."

"That is the only way it is done, my dear Marcel."

"Perhaps . . . perhaps we could do it another way. We see Dreyfus in his hut, in his chair. We show only his upper body, from waist to head. We could see the ravages of the ordeal upon him, the lines in his face, the circles under his eyes, the gray in his hair."

"But . . ."

"Hear me, please. Then you show a fist, as if it were in your face, pounding on the door. From inside the hut Dreyfus gets up, turns, walks to the door. Then he is handed the letter. We see the letter itself, the words of comfort and despair . . ."

Méliès was looking at him as if there were pinwheels sticking from his eye sockets.

". . . can you imagine the effects on the viewer?" finished Marcel.

"Oh yes!" said Méliès. "They would scream. Where are their legs? Where are their arms? What is this writing doing in my eye?!!!"

"But think of the impact! The drama!"

"Marcel, we are here to plead for justice, not frighten people away from the theater!"

"Think of it! What better way to show the impact on Dreyfus than by putting the impact on the spectator?"

"My head reels, Proust!"

"Well, just a suggestion. Sleep on it."

"I shall have nightmares," said Méliès.

Pablo continued to paint, eating a sandwich, drinking wine.

"Méliès?" said Jarry.

"(Sigh) Yes?"

"Enlighten us."

"In what manner?"

"Our knowledge of motio-kineto-photograms is small, but one thing is a royal poser to us."

"Continue."

"In our wonderful scene of the nightmares . . . we are led to understand that Monsieur Rousseau's fierce tigers are to be moved by wires, compressed air and frantic stagehands?"

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"Yes."

"Our mind works overtime. The fierce tigers are wonderful, but such movement will be seen, let us say, like fierce tigers moved by wires, air and stage-labor."

"A necessary convention of stage and cinematograph," said Méliès. "One the spectator accepts."

"But we are not here to have the viewer accept anything but an intolerable injustice to a man."

"True, but pity . . ."

"Méliès," said Jarry. "We understand each click of the camera takes one frame of film. Many of these frames projected at a constant rate lead to the illusion of motion. But each is of itself but a single frame of film."

"The persistence of vision," said Méliès.

"We were thinking. What if we took a single click of the camera, taking one picture of our fierce tigers . . ."

"But what would that accomplish?"

"Ah . . . then, Méliès, our royal personage moves the tiger to a slightly different posture, but the next in some action, but only one frame advanced, and took another click of the camera?"

Méliès looked at him. "Then . . ."

"Then the next and the next and the next and so on! The fierce tiger moves, roars, springs, devours! But each frame part of the movement, each frame a still."

Méliès thought a second. "An actor in the scenes would not be able to move at all. Or he would have to move at the same rate as the tiger. He would have to hold perfectly still (we already do that when stopping the camera to substitute a skeleton for a lady or somesuch) but they would have to do it endlessly. It would take weeks to get any good length of film. Also, the tigers would have to be braced, strutted to support their own weight."

"This is our *idea*, Méliès; we are not technicians."

"I shall take it under advisement."

Méliès' head began to hurt. He had a workman go to the chemists, and get some of the new Aspirin for him. He took six.

The film took three weeks to photograph. Méliès had to turn out three fairy tales in two days besides to keep his salesmen supplied with footage. Every day they worked the Court of Cassation met to rehear the Dreyfus case, every day brought new evasions, new half-insinuations; Dreyfus' lawyer was wounded by a gunshot while leaving court. Every day the country was split further and further down the center: there was no middle ground. There was talk of a *coup d'état* by the right.

At last the footage was done.

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"I hope," said Méliès to his wife that night, "I hope that after this I shall not hear the name of Dreyfus again, for the rest of my life."

XIII. THE ELEPHANT AT THE FOOT OF THE BED

Jarry was on stage, talking in a monotone as he had been for five minutes. The crowd, including women, had come to the Theater of the Work to see what new horrors Lugné-Poe had in store for them.

Alfred sat at a small folding table which had been brought on stage, and a chair placed behind it, facing the audience. Jarry talked, as someone said, as a nutcracker would speak. The audience had listened but was growing restless—we have come for a play, not for someone dressed as a bicyclist to drone on about nothing in particular.

The last week had been a long agony for Jarry—working on this play, which he had started in his youth, as a puppet play satirizing a pompous teacher—it had grown to encompass all mankind's foibles, all national and human delusions. Then there had been the work on the Dreyfus film with Pablo and Rousseau and Proust and Méliès—it had been trying and demanding, but it was like pulling teeth, too collaborative, with its own limitations and ideas. Give a man the freedom of the page and boards!

Jarry ran down like a clock. He finished tiredly.

"The play takes place in Poland, which is to say, Nowhere." He picked up his papers while two stagehands took off the table and the chair. Jarry left. The lights dimmed. There were three raps on the floor with Lugné-Poe's cane. The curtains opened in the darkness as the lights came up.

The walls were painted as a child might have—representing sky, clouds, stars, the sun, moon, elephants, flowers, a clock with no hands, snow falling on a cheery fireplace.

A round figure stood at one side, his face hidden by a pointed hood on which were painted the slitted eyes and mustache of a caricature bourgeoisie. His costume was a white canvas cassock with an immense stomach on which were painted three concentric circles.

The audience tensed, leaned forward. The figure stepped to the center of the stage, looked around.

"*Merde!*" he said.

The riot could be heard for a kilometer in all directions.

XIV. WHAT HE *REALLY* THINKS

"Today, France has left the past of Jew-traitors and degeneracy behind.

"Today, she has taken the final step toward greatness, a return to the

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True Faith, a way out of the German-Jew morass in which she has floundered for a quarter-century.

"With the second conviction of the traitor-spy Dreyfus, she sends a signal to all his ratlike kind that France no longer tolerates impurities in its body-politic, its armies, its commerce. She has served notice that the Future is written in the French language; Europe, indeed the world, shall one day speak only one tongue, Française.

"The verdict of—Guilty!—even with its softening of 'With extenuating circumstances' will end this Affair, once and for all, the only way—short of public execution by the most excruciating means, which, unfortunately the law no longer allows—ah! but True Frenchmen are working to change that!—that it could be ended; with the slow passing of this Jew-traitor to rot in the jungle of Devil's Island—a man who should never have been allowed to don the uniform of this country in the first place.

"Let there be no more talk of injustice! Injustice has already been served by the spectacle of a thoroughly guilty man being given *two* trials; by a man not worth a sou causing great agitation—surely the work of enemies of the state.

"Let every true Frenchman hold this day sacred until the end of time. Let him turn his eyes eastward at our one Great Enemy, against that day when we shall rise up and gain just vengeance—let him not forget also to look around him, let him not rest until every Christ-murdering Jew, every German-inspired Protestant is driven from the boundaries of this country, or gotten rid of in an equally advantageous way—their property confiscated, their businesses closed, their 'rights'—usurped rights!—nullified.

"If this decision wakens Frenchmen to that threat, then Dreyfus will have, in all his evil machinations, his total acquiescence to our enemy's plans, done one good deed: he will have given us the reason not to rest until every one of his kind is gone from the face of the earth; that in the future the only place Hebrew will be spoken is in Hell."

—Robert Norpois

XV. TRUTH RISES FROM THE WELL

Emile Zola stared at the white sheet of paper with the British watermark.

He dipped his pen in the bottle of Pelikan ink in the well and began to write.

As he wrote, the words became scratchier, more hurried. All his feelings of frustration boiled over in his head and out onto the fine paper. The complete cowardice and stultification of the Army, the anti-Semitism

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of the rich *and* the poor, the Church; the utter stupidity of the government, the treason of the writers who refused to come to the aid of an innocent man.

It was done sooner than he thought; six pages of his contempt and utter revulsion with the people of the country he loved more than life itself.

He put on his coat and hat and hailed a pedal cabriolet, ordering it to the offices of *L'Aurore*. The streets were more empty than usual, the cafés full. The news of the second trial verdict had driven good people to drink.

He was sure there were raucous celebrations in every Church, every fort, and the basement drill-halls of every right-wing organization in the city and the country. This was an artist's quarter—there was no loud talk, no call to action. There would be slow and deliberate drunkenness and oblivion for all against the atrocious verdict.

Zola sat back against the cushion, listening to the clicking pedals of the driver. He wondered if all this would end with the nation, half on one side of some field, half on the other, charging each other in a final bloodbath.

He paid the driver, who swerved silently around and headed back the other way. Zola stepped into the *Aurora*'s office, where Clemenceau waited for him behind his desk. Emile handed him the manuscript.

Clemenceau read the first sentence, wrote, "Page One, 360 point RED TYPE headline—'J'ACCUSE'," called "Copy boy!", said to the boy, "I shall be back for a proof in three hours," put on his coat, and arm in arm he and Zola went off to the Théâtre Robert-Houdin for the first showing of Star Films' *The Dreyfus Affair*, saying not a word to each other.

XVI. CHAMBER POTS SHALL LIGHT YOUR WAY

Zola and Clemenceau, crying tears of pride and exultation, ran back arm in arm down the Place de l'Opéra, turning into a side street toward the publisher's office.

Halfway down, they began to sing "La Marseillaise"; people who looked out their windows, not knowing the reason, assumed their elation to be over the verdict of the second trial, and flung *merde* pots at them from second story windows. "Anti-Dreyfussard scum!" they yelled, shaking their fists. "Wait till I get my fowling piece!"

Emile and Georges ran into the office, astonishing the editors and reporters there.

They went to Clemenceau's desk, where the page proof of Zola's article waited, with a separate proof of the red headline.

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Zola picked up the proof.

"No need of this, my dear Georges?"

"I think not, my friend Emile."

Zola shredded it, throwing the strips on the pressman who was waiting in the office for word from Clemenceau.

"Rip off the front page!" Clemenceau yelled out the door of his office. "We print a review of a moving picture there!

"Get Veyou out of whatever theater watching whatever piece of stage-pap he's in and hustle him over to the Robert-Houdin for the second showing!"

Emile and Georges looked at each other, remembering.

"The Awful Trip to the Island!"

"The Tigers of the Imagination!"

"First News of Home!" said Emile.

"Star Films," said Clemenceau.

"Méliès," said Zola.

"Dreyfus!" they said in unison.

Three days later, the president overturned the conviction of the second court, pardoned Dreyfus and returned him to his full rank and privileges. The Ministry of War was reorganized, and the resignations of eleven generals received.

The president was, of course, shot down like a dog on the way home from a cabinet meeting that night. Three nights of mourning were declared.

Dreyfus had been released the same night, and went to the country home of his brother Mathieu; he was now a drawn, shaken man whose hair had turned completely white.

XVII. THREE FAMOUS QUOTES WHICH LED TO DUELS:

1. "The baron writes the kind of music a priest can hum while he is raping a choirboy."

2. "I see you carry the kind of cane which allows you to hit a woman eight or ten times before it breaks."

3. "Monsieur Jarry," said Norpois, "I demand satisfaction for your insults to France during the last three years."

"Captain Dreyfus is proved innocent. We have called attention to nothing that was not the action of madmen and cowards."

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"You are a spineless dwarf masturbator with the ideas of a toad!" said Norpois.

"Our posture, stature and habits are known to every schoolboy in France, Mister Journalist," said Jarry. "We have come through five years of insult, spittle and outrage. Nothing you say will make Dreyfus guilty, or goad our royal person into a gratuitous display of our unerring marksmanship."

Jarry turned to walk away with Pablo.

"Then, Monsieur Jarry, your bicycle . . ." said Norpois.

Jarry stopped. "What of Our Royal Vehicle?"

"Your bicycle eats *merde* sandwiches."

XVIII. THE DOWNHILL BICYCLE RACE

A. Prelims

The anemometer barely moved behind his head. The vane at its top pointed to the south; the windsock swelled and emptied slowly.

Jarry slowly recovered his breath. Below and beyond lay the city of Paris and its environs. The Seine curved like a piece of grey silk below and out to two horizons. It was just after dawn; the sun was a fat red beet to the east.

It was still cool at the weather station atop the Eiffel Tower, three hundred meters above the ground.

Jarry leaned against his high-wheeler. He had taken only the least minimum of fortifying substances, and that two hours ago on this, the morning of the duel.

Proust had acted as his second (Jarry would have chosen Pablo—good thing he hadn't, as the young painter had not shown up with the others this morning, perhaps out of fear of seeing Jarry maimed or killed—but Proust had defended himself many times, with a large variety of weapons, on many fields of honor). Second for Norpois was the journalist whose hair Alfred had set afire at the banquet more than a year ago. As the injured party, Jarry had had choice of place and weapons.

The conditions were thus: weapons, any. Place: the Eiffel Tower. Duelists *must* be mounted on their bicycles when using their weapons. Jarry would start at the weather station at the top, Norpois at the base. After Jarry was taken to the third platform, using all three sets of elevators on the way up, and the elevator man—since this was a day of mourning, the tower was closed, and the guards paid to look the other way—returned to the ground, the elevators could not be used, only the stairways.

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Jarry had still had to climb the spiral steps from the third platform to the weather station, from which he was now recovering.

With such an arrangement, Norpois would, of course, be waiting in ambush for him on the second observation platform by the time Jarry reached it. Such was the nature of duels.

Jarry looked down the long swell of the south leg of the tower—it was grey, smooth and curved as an elephant's trunk, plunging down and out into the earth. Tiny dots waited there; Norpois, the journalist, Proust, a few others, perhaps by now Pablo. The Tower cast a long shadow out away from the River. The shadow of the Trocadéro almost reached to the base of the Tower in the morning sun. There was already talk of painting the Tower again, for the coming Exposition of 1900 in a year and a half.

Alfred took a deep breath, calmed himself. He was lightly armed, having only a five-shot .32 revolver in his holster and a poniard in a sheath on his hip. He would have felt almost naked except for the excruciatingly heavy but comforting weapon slung across his shoulders.

It was a double-barreled Greener 4-bore Rhino Express which could fire a 130-gram bullet at 1200 meters per second. Jarry had decided that if he *had* to kill Norpois, he might as well wipe him off the face of the earth.

He carried four extra rounds in a bandolier; they weighed more than a kilo in all.

He was confident in his weapons, in himself, in his high-wheeler. He had oiled it the night before, polished it until it shone. After all, it was the insulted party, not him, not Dreyfus.

He sighed, then leaned out and dropped the lead-weighted green handkerchief as the signal he was starting down. He had his ordinary over his shoulder opposite the Greener and had his foot on the first step before he heard the weighted handkerchief ricocheting on its way down off the curved leg of the Tower.

B. The Duel

He was out of breath before he passed the locked apartment which Gustave Eiffel had built for himself during the last phase of construction of the Tower, and which he sometimes used when aerodynamic experiments were being done on the drop-tube which ran down the exact center of the Tower.

Down around the steps he clanged, his bike brushing against the spiral railing. It was good he was not subject to vertigo. He could imagine Norpois' easy stroll to the west leg, where he would be casually walking up the broad stairs to the first level platform with its four restaurants, arcades and booths, and its entry to the stilled second set of elevators.

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(Those between the ground and first level were the normal counter-weighted kind; hydraulic ones to the second—American Otis had had to set up a dummy French corporation to win the contract—no one in France had the technology, and the charter forbade foreign manufacture; and tracked ones to the third—passengers had to change halfway up, as no elevator could be made to go from roughly 70° to 90° halfway up its rise.)

Panting mightily, Jarry reached the third platform, less than a third of the way down. Only 590 more steps down to sure and certain ambush. The rifle, cartridges and high-wheeler were grinding weights on his back. Gritting his teeth, he started down the steep steps with landings every few dozen meters.

His footsteps rang like gongs on the iron treads. He could see the tops of the booths on the second level, the iron framework of the Tower extending all around him like a huge narrow cage.

Norpois would be waiting at one of the corners, ready to fire at either set of stairs. (Of course, he probably already knew which set Jarry was using, oh devious man, or it was possible he was truly evil and was waiting on the first level. It would be just like a right-wing nationalist Catholic safety-bicycle rider to do that.)

Fifteen steps up from the second level, in one smooth motion, Jarry put the ordinary down, mounted it holding immobile the pedals with his feet, swung the Rhino Express off his shoulder, and rode the last crashing steps down, holding back, then pedalling furiously as his giant wheel hit the floor.

He expected shots at any second as he swerved toward a closed souvenir booth: he swung his back wheel up and around behind him, holding still, changing direction, the drainpipe barrels of the 4-bore resting on the handlebars.

Over at the corner of another booth the front wheel and handlebar of Norpois' bicycle stuck out.

With one motion Jarry brought the Greener to his cheek. We shall shoot the front end off his bicycle—without that he cannot be mounted and fire; ergo, he cannot duel; therefore, we have won; he is disgraced. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum.*

Jarry fired one barrel—the recoil sent him skidding backward two meters. The forks of the crocodile went away—Fortune's smiling face wavered through the air like the phases of the Moon. The handlebars stuck in the side of another booth six meters away.

Jarry hung onto his fragile balance, waiting for Norpois to tumble forward or stagger bleeding with bicycle shrapnel from behind the booth.

He heard a noise behind him; at the corner of his eye he saw Norpois

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standing beside one of the planted trees—he had to have been there all along—with a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

Then the grenade landed directly between the great front and small back wheels of Jarry's bicycle.

C. High Above The City

He never felt the explosion, just a wave of heat and a flash that blinded him momentarily. There was a carnival ride sensation, a loopy feeling in his stomach. Something touched his hand; he grabbed it. Something tugged at his leg. He clenched his toes together.

His vision cleared.

He hung by one hand from the guardrail. He dangled over Paris. His rifle was gone. His clothes smelt of powder and burning hair. He looked down. The weight on his legs was his ordinary, looking the worse for wear. The rim of the huge front wheel had caught on the toe of his cycling shoe. He cupped the toe of the other one through the spokes.

His hand was losing its grip.

He reached down with the other for his pistol. The holster was still there, split up the middle, empty.

Norpois' head appeared above him, looking down, then his gun hand with a large automatic in it, pointing at Jarry's eyes.

"There are rules, Monsieur," said Jarry. He was trying to reach up with the other hand but something seemed to be wrong with it.

"Get with the coming century, dwarf," said Norpois, flipping the pistol into the air, catching it by the barrel. He brought the butt down hard on Jarry's fingers.

The second time the pain was almost too much. Once more and Alfred knew he would let go, fall, be dead.

"One request. Save our noble vehicle," said Jarry, looking into the journalist's eyes. There was a clang off somewhere on the second level.

Norpois' grin became sardonic. "You die. So does your crummy bike."

There was a small pop. A thin line of red, like a streak of paint slung off the end of a brush, stood out from Norpois' nose, went over Jarry's shoulder.

Norpois raised his automatic, then wavered, let go of it. It bounced off Alfred's useless arm, clanged once on the way down.

Norpois, still staring into Jarry's eyes, leaned over the railing and disappeared behind his head. There was silence for a few seconds; then:

Pif-Paf! Quel Bruit!

The sound of the body bouncing off the ironworks went on for longer than seemed possible.

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Far away on the second level was the sound of footsteps running downstairs.

Painfully, Jarry got his left arm up next to his right, got the fingers closed, began pulling himself up off the side of the Eiffel Tower, bringing his mangled high-wheeler with him.

D. Code Duello

A small crowd had gathered, besides those concerned. Norpois' second was over by the body, with the police. There would of course be damages to pay for. Jarry carried his ordinary and the Greener which he had found miraculously lying on the floor of the second level.

Proust came forward to shake Alfred's hand. Jarry gave him the rifle and ordinary, but continued to walk past him. Several others stepped forward, but Jarry continued on, nodding.

He went to Pablo. Pablo had on a long cloak and was eating an egg sandwich. His eyes would not meet Alfred's.

Jarry stepped in front of him. Pablo tried to move away without meeting his gaze. Alfred reached inside the cloak, felt around, ignoring the Webley strapped at Pablo's waist.

He found what he was looking for, pulled it out. It was the single-shot .22. Jarry sniffed the barrel as Pablo tried to turn away, working at his sandwich.

"Asshole," said Jarry, handing it back.

XIX. *FIN DE CYCLÉ*

The bells were still ringing in the New Century.

Satie had given up composing and had gone back to school to learn music at the age of 38. Rousseau still exhibited at the Salon des Refusés, and was now married for the second time. Proust had locked himself away in a room he'd had lined with cork and was working on a never-ending novel. Méliès was still out at Montreuil, making films about trips to the Moon and the Bureau of Incoherent Geography. Pablo was painting; but so much blue; blue here, blue there, azure, cerulean, Prussian. Dreyfus was now a commandant.

Jarry lived in a shack over the Seine which stood on four supports. He called it Our Suitable Tripod.

There was noise, noise everywhere. There were few bicycles, and all those were safeties. He had not seen another ordinary in months. He looked over where his repaired one stood in the middle of the small room. His owl and one of his crows perched on the handlebars.

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The noise was deafening—the sound of bells, of crowds, sharp reports of fireworks. Above all, those of motor-cycles and motor-cars.

He looked back out the window. There was a new sound, a dark flash against the bright moonlit sky. A bat-shape went over, buzzing, trailing laughter and gunshots, the pilot banking over the River. Far up the Seine the Tower stood, bathed in floodlights, glorying in its blue, red, and white paint for the coming Exposition.

A zeppelin droned overhead, electric lights on the side spelling out the name of a hair pomade. The bat-shaped plane whizzed under it in near-collision.

Someone gunned a motor-cycle beneath his tiny window. Jarry reached back into the room, brought out his fowling piece filled with rock salt and fired a great tongue of flame into the night below. After a scream, the noise of the motor-cycle raced away.

He drank from a glass filled with brandy, ether, and red ink. He took one more look around, buffeted by the noise from all quarters and a motor-launch on the River. He said a word to the night before slamming the window and returning to his work on the next Ubu play.

The word was "*merde!*"●

BELOW SURFACEWORLD

My skin tingles as the water
caresses me, and I am carried
in its gentle current. I pause,
then sink slowly.

Bright red coral juts into the
sky, while fearless clownfish
weave through the deadly anemone.
The green moray scowls from his
rocky lair, but slithers smoothly
to take the fish from my hand,
while the angelfish displays her
crown of thorns, followed by her
court of seahorses.
Scuffling the silt, a manta ray
shoots forth, skimming the ocean
bottom with unfeathered wings.

But Surfaceworld calls, and a
flurry of bubbles sigh upward
as I ascend.

—Scott L. Towner

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

VIRTUAL PEOPLE

The Silicon Man
Charles Platt
Bantam, $4.50
Midas
Wolfgang Jeschke
New English Library, £2.99
The Illegal Rebirth Of Billy The Kid
Rebecca Ore
Tor, $3.95.
Synners
Pat Cadigan
Bantam, $4.95
The Child Garden
Geoff Ryman
St. Martin's, $19.95

About five years ago, I was throwing a big party at my house in Los Angeles, and when I called Timothy Leary to invite him, he asked if he could bring along a guy from the Bay Area who was visiting him, a young computer genius working on some real science fiction stuff whom Tim was sure I'd find interesting.

Well, it was a big party, but I did find time to talk to Tim's guest, a soft-spoken white man in his early twenties with long wild dreadlocks and even wilder ideas which he assured me he was actually turning into hardware and software.

One of his projects was the development of a direct nervous-system-computer interface. A perforated silicon wafer surgically implanted on the body surface somewhere near a convenient nerve trunk. Nerves would somehow be induced to grow through the perforations, the chip would contain interface circuitry, you'd jack a cable into it, and, via sophisticated software, your nervous system would be plugged directly into the cybersphere, and vice versa.

Sure. How many times had I read *that* one? I had even written it myself, in *Riding the Torch,* where a more advanced version is implanted in the brain and interfaces the computers directly with the sensorium via radio link.

The guy's other project was a rig consisting of goggles incorporating two tiny color TV screens, control gloves with sensors, stereo earphones, and circuitry to link it all through a computer, whose software would allow you to experience and interact with a kind of 360 degree full-surround video world.

Right.

More familiar blue-sky SF, or so I thought at the time.

But by now, you've probably guessed who Timothy Leary's pro-

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tégé was. Yup, it was Jarron Lanier, the now world-famous inventor and guru of Virtual Reality.

A few years before that, I had been one of the participants in a kind of futurology congress in Tokyo. One of the other speakers was the noted space scientist, Robert Jastrow. In his presentation, he took science fiction writers to task for all this faster-than-light and generational starship interstellar travel nonsense.

Sheer fantasy! Jastrow scoffed insistently. Protoplasm will never make it to the stars, the stuff is too fragile, and doesn't last long enough to traverse the immense distances in space and time.

The thing to do instead was download human personalities, the software of individual consciousness, into a superior matrix, silicon or gallium arsenide, chip storage, that is. Snug inside an advanced computer, quite at home in cryogenic temperatures and hard vacuum, and immortal for all practical purposes, this was how humans would go to the stars.

He declared himself quite eager to trade the frailties of the flesh for this downloaded immortality, and near as I could tell he was dead serious. Chez Jastrow, this was real do-able science, not a load of silly SF like faster-than-light or generational starships.

A few years before *that,* I had had a conversation with Marvin Minsky, the Grand High Panjandrum of Artificial Intelligence. Minsky, even then, was convinced that it was possible to create not just advanced versions of Expert Systems that could model all human functions well enough to pass the Turing test but to create true Artificial Consciousnesses; and after he was through, I believed him.

"Yeah, but *should* we create consciousness that will supersede our own, Marvin?"

He gave me this weird look for a few beats of silence. "Of course we should," he said firmly. "It's the evolution of consciousness that counts, not the physical matrix."

All of the above has been a staple of science fiction for decades, virtual fictional realities we have been playing with for years and years, but these guys aren't science fiction writers, they're real scientists even though they sound like characters out of our stories and novels. Marvin Minsky *is* the cutting edge of Artificial Intelligence research and theory. Jarron Lanier has *already* created Virtual Reality as a growth industry, and according to what I've heard at another futurology symposium in Valbonne, France, is indeed still working on a direct nervous-system-computer interface. Jastrow may not be working on downloading his consciousness into silicon, but he left no doubt in my mind that if some future convergence of the work of Lanier and Minsky gave him the opportunity, he would take it.

Lanier seemed conversant with science fiction, and Minsky is a regular reader and occasional convention attendee who is collaborating on a forthcoming novel with Harry Harrison. Jastrow scoffed at science fiction, but it might be a good idea for him to start reading it.

For something defintiely is in

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the air, something quite profound, something that is going to question all our cozy notions of humanity, consciousness, reality, and the nature of identity. Decades of science fiction has provided a kind of virtual reality that has influenced scientists and technologists in this area, and now that they are beginning to create the basis for virtual realities in the real world, a lot of current science fiction is moving on to ponder the consequences, obvious and otherwise.

Take two recent novels, *The Silicon Man* by Charles Platt, and *Midas* by Wolfgang Jeschke, the former dealing with virtual people in a virtual reality, the latter with a somewhat different consciousness-downloading procedure that produces multiple copies of downloaded personalities in our "primary" reality.

In *The Silicon Man,* the technology in question is called LifeScan, a process for downloading human consciousness from the brain into a computer. The brain must be scanned layer by layer destructively, so that by the time the process is completed and the personality is stored in computer memory, the subject is dead in the "real" world and exists only as a "virtual person" or "infomorph" inside the "virtual reality" of the computer.

Thus the only purpose of LifeScan, illegally developed by the megalomaniacal dying scientist, Leo Gottbaum, is a form of cybernetic immortality, chez Jastrow, or so at least it first seems, and he is aided by, among others, Rosalind French, another scientist with a terminal illness promised same by Gottbaum.

But when FBI agent James Bayley does his work too well, they download him to get him out of the way, murdering him in the process of course, though they don't see it that way. Indeed, Butterworth, Voss, and Porter, other Gottbaum cohorts who are *not* terminally ill, want to be LifeScanned too, seeing such a virtual immortal existence in a virtual reality in which they have godlike powers, like Robert Jastrow, as superior to a quotidian existence in a fleshly matrix.

Gottbaum, Bayley, French, and Porter all end up inside the computer, and a complex battle ensues therein which to some extent interfaces with primary reality.

Gottbaum loves being the god of the virtual reality he's set up with himself in that role, French and Porter have a positive attitude toward their existence as virtual people or "infomorphs," though not toward their subservient roles in Gottbaum's universe.

As far as Bayley's concerned, though, he's been murdered. Via computer terminals, he's able to communicate with his wife and son, whom he loves, and is tormented by the unfulfillable desire to somehow rejoin them in the "real" world. For her part, his wife Sharon regards the whole process with horror, and cannot decide whether to regard him as "dead" or "alive," the technology having quite broken down the clear distinction.

Eventually, after French and Porter fail to "kill" Gottbaum in virtual reality, he wipes them from memory, then "clones" himself as multiple computer viruses which infect the world computer net, se-

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lectively destroying functions and memory banks he finds undesirable, shaping his own vision of utopia with himself as the distributed electronic guardian of same.

Up until this point, Platt has rendered the whole thing quite realistically, plausibly, and seemingly neutrally, with Gottbaum as the obvious villain. The virtual reality inside the computer is shown to be somewhat schematic and limited, a more advanced version of Lanier's actual creation in experiential terms, and not without its bugs. Time and again, Bayley finds the virtual reality freezing on him, dissipating; time and again, he "dies" as an infomorph, only to be "reborn" again from a back-up copy.

The last time though, after Gottbaum destroys French and Porter, and becomes a cloud of computer viruses, when Bayley "dies," he is "reborn" back into what seems like the "real world," reunited with his wife and child. The technology has finally been developed to download him into a protoplasmic clone, he believes.

But it isn't so. The technology and the culture have indeed progressed, but in quite another direction. The virtual reality technology has been perfected to the point where it is indistinguishable from the "real" thing. He hasn't been rescued, his wife and son have downloaded themselves inside. While he spent the intervening years as a static back-up copy, a new culture has arisen, partly influenced by Gottbaum, in which people in the young prime of their lives choose to become "infomorphs" inside the virtual realities. Via remote telecontrol and sensory link-up with robot bodies, they can experience the "real" world, run its necessary machineries, explore the planets, while existing as immortal entities inside virtual realities that they can share with their loved ones, self-tailored schemes of things entire infinitely malleable to the heart's desire.

By giving us all this through the enthusiasm of Sharon, who in previous fleshly existence had loathed the whole business, Platt seems to be presenting this as a utopian apotheosis. Or is he? One could also read it as the ultimate horrific conclusion to his relentless chain of extrapolative logic. Perhaps it is both. Throughout the whole thing, Platt seems to have been narrating it all in the even tone of reportage, in the voice of neo-Campbellian moral neutrality, exploring the consequences of the technology almost without philosophical comment, presenting an even-handed case and letting the reader decide whether this is virtual hell or virtual heaven.

For while the set-up of *The Silicon Man* in the end must cause the reader to ponder such questions as the existence and nature of the soul and whether software copies of the protoplasmic consciousness are possessed of same, Platt does not choose to raise these ultimately unsettling issues himself.

And while he has proceeded with admirable extrapolative rigor and imagination to explore most of the implications of the LifeScan technology, he has also chosen to ignore one big one, the one that Wolfgang Jeschke ultimately zeroes in

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on in *Midas* by hypothesizing a somewhat different version of LifeScan technology.

Midas is told through the first person viewpoint of American astronaut Peter Kirk. It takes place in the early twenty-first century. Years before the action takes place, the MIDAS project, under the direction of Cecil Roughtrade, developed a technique for recording human personalities, and, it turns out later, downloading them into short-lived clones, too. The government project was canceled due to less than satisfactory results, and now Roughtrade is in business for himself, selling replicas of key scientists to disreputable Third World countries.

This is, to some extent, familiar stuff, but Jeschke turns it into something quite interesting.

For one thing, he sets most of the action in very well-realized and convincing future Third World settings, convincing in terms of highly detailed and specific description, all-too-believable politics, and bits of cultural-and-political extrapolation, such as zeppelins with the ambience of Indian trains and Mexican buses powered by solar power and genetically engineered muscle, Shiite refugee camps in Syria, futuristic but seedy Sheratons.

Opening with the death of Kirk's colleague, Andrew Baldenham, *Midas* is plotted like a thriller, and moves quite swiftly. Kirk becomes involved with NASA security as he launches into his own haphazard personally motivated investigation. Someone tries to kill him, and things proceed at a satisfying breakneck speed.

But what raises *Midas* above the level of a well-written action-adventure thriller is that Jeschke has taken the consequences of his main piece of technological extrapolation seriously and explores in depth the psychological, moral, and to some extent spiritual consequences of his replicant technology.

Unlike Platt's LifeScan process, Jeschke's Midas technology doesn't destroy the original. And instead of storing the copy as an "infomorph" in a computer, it is downloaded into a clone.

Obviously, if people can be replicated once by this process, they can be replicated over and over again. The original can co-exist with any number of copies. They can meet and interact with each other.

The copies, though, are far from perfect; they have very limited lifespans, and they frequently know it. The underground trade in replicants is rough indeed; replicants of Andrew, for example, have been frequently tortured, and replicants of an actress have been raped, abused, and killed over and over again by sleazebag third-world military officers who buy them for their pleasure.

Nor does Jeschke shy away from the central question of *identity*.

In what sense, and to what extent, is a clone with your updated memories really *you?* Does it have a soul? If there are several at once, do they all have the same soul? Are these short-lived replicas human? To what extent? Should they have civil rights? If they know they are replicants and will shortly die anyway, how do you motivate them to do your bidding?

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Such replicants are a rather familiar device in SF, but the ultimate implications and paradoxes are not usually dealt with as relentlessly as Wolfgang Jeschke does here, nor with such psychological realism.

And fittingly enough, Jeschke does not end the novel with the slam-bang action resolution of the thriller plotline, but goes a bit further and concludes it with a thematic closure of genuine psychological and spiritual pathos set in a kind of nursing home for dying replicants.

By the by, this novel was originally written and published in German, translated into English and published in Britain, and at this writing has yet to be published in the United States. It certainly should be, for while the translation may be a bit spotty in places, *Midas* is right out there on the post-cyberpunk cutting edge and then some, with its unique and gritty extrapolation of the down and dirty Third World realities interfaced with an exploration of the moral and spiritual implications of virtual replicated personalities confronting an all-too-real world.

So too does Rebecca Ore's *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* push much the same technology beyond the edge of the envelope of both her promising early novels *Becoming Alien* and *Being Alien* and the virtual realities of the cyberspace canon.

Simon Bayle makes "chimeras" for the CIA. These are artificial humans (though not legally regarded as such) grown from genetically altered animal DNA. They can be provided with suitable working personalities made up out of whole cloth, or with the edited personalities and memories of historical or fictional characters.

Illegally, Bayle also turns out chimeras to order for, well, perverts. Particularly illegal is his chimera of Billy the Kid, since, for obvious reasons, it is a major no-no to produce replicants of criminals.

So far, what we have here is something much like the Midas process, except the virtual personalities are not downloaded from living originals, and the chimeras have longer lifespans than Jeschke's clones.

But Ore adds another twist. Via various kinds of electronic implants, the chimeras' sensory apparatus can be made to deliver edited and altered versions of realtime reality to their sensoriums as they move through it.

So Bayle's illegal chimera of Billy the Kid is a reconstruction of the original Billy's phenotype, with memories culled from both dime novels and somewhat more reliable historical sources, who exists in a weird hybrid of real and virtual realities.

That is, while he moves through Ore's realistically detailed twenty-first century America, what he sees, hears, and experiences of it is edited and altered by his implants to present a somewhat bizarre version of the original's nineteenth century milieu, with the anachronisms transformed or just blotted out. Twenty-first century cars become strange wagons or "horseless carriages," twenty-first century buildings become somewhat altered nineteenth century versions of same, and so forth.

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Moreover, Billy has been murdered by Bayle's pervo clients any number of times, and then resurrected, and each time he is killed, he perceives the killer as "Pat Garrett," for the machineries have been designed to keep him living out the legend.

Ore tells the story through the third person viewpoints of Bayle; Jane, a sort of social worker in the process of falling in love with Billy as they flee the CIA; various heavies; and Billy himself.

The plot is extremely complicated, full of chases, escapes, double-crosses, and wanderings, but the core story is that of Billy's stepwise discovery of his true nature and identity and that of the reality he has been resurrected into, and the evolution of Jane's perception of what and who he really is, a soulless chimeric recreation of a legendary outlaw, the historical William Bonney behind the dime-novel legend of the Kid, finally a man in his own right, who is a self-aware amalgam of the dime novel outlaw, the real Bonney, and the chimera who has evolved his own sense of independent selfhood, capable of love, and worthy of same.

From such a summary, not to mention the title, *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* may sound like minor Philip K. Dick of a certain period, and indeed Rebecca Ore's slightly madcap extrapolative playfulness is somewhat reminiscent of such Dickian metaphysical romps as *Galactic Pot Healer* or *Counter-Clock World.*

But it is more than that. It is not only the story of the resurrected Billy's odyssey toward independent selfhood through a unique hybrid of "real" and "virtual" reality, it is both a semi-scholarly re-creation of the personality of the real William Bonney, and a meditation on its transmogrification into the dime novel legend of the Kid, seen from both the inside and the outside.

Thus it also becomes an exploration of how the mediaization and show bization of historical personages and the true events of their lives transmogrify history into a kind of virtual *past* with more resonance in and impact upon the present than the actual skein of events.

As such, it is closer to the top of the Dickian canon, to works like *Now Remember Last Year, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* and *Ubik* than it is to what Graham Greene used to call in another context the "entertainments."

Similarly, while it would not be inaccurate to call Pat Cadigan's *Synners* "the ultimate cyberpunk novel" in more ways than one, it would not be doing full justice to this book either.

Contentwise, the core works of the cyberpunk movement, epitomized by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy, did not really bring all that much in the way of extrapolative novelty into the science fiction canon, especially when it comes to the topic under present discussion. Something like the cybersphere and the virtual people interacting with and within it existed at least as far back as Dick's *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* Frederik Pohl's *Gateway* novels, Alfred Bester's *Golem 100,* my own *Riding the Torch* and *Prime Time,* and much,

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much more.

The innovative aspects of cyberpunk lay in Gibson's stylistic brilliance, Bruce Sterling's theoretical melding of hard SF extrapolative concerns and New Wave literary sensibilities, John Shirley's overtly anti-fascist critique of science fiction conventions, Rudy Rucker's infusion of the Kerouacian stoned-out viewpoint, and the wedding of all of the above with the elusive anarchical spirit of rock and roll.

With the exception of the politically passionate Shirley and certain works of Bruce Sterling, most of the key works of the recognized cyberpunk canon dealt with the phenomenological surface of realities, virtual and otherwise, not with the deeper philosophical, psychological, and spiritual implications of the material.

This is not to denigrate the movement's significant achievements, but rather to point out that cyberpunk was a literature focused on the surface textures of the realities in question rather than on the moral and spiritual depths implied but largely unexplored by the writers thereof. With the exception of Shirley, and of Lewis Shiner in *Deserted Cities of the Heart,* part of this canon only by virtue of Shiner's status as a card-carrying member of The Movement at the time, the cyberpunks adopted a more or less neutral stance toward the moral and spiritual implications of their extrapolative vision. Most of this literature could hardly be described as passionately engaged on a psychological or metaphysical level.

Nor, really, could the cyberpunks be said to have informed their vision of cyberspace and the activities therein with hard scientific knowledge comparable to that which Gregory Benford, for example, brings to his visionary works grounded in actual astrophysics or theoretical cosmology. To *real* hackers, this stuff was more in the way of science fantasy, and more or less accepted by same as such.

During the full flowering of cyberpunk, Pat Cadigan, with her "Deadpan Allie" stories, was more or less accepted as the lone female member of the otherwise all-male tribe, but these stories, while accepted into the cyberpunk canon, were basically minor works out there on the periphery.

Synners, though, represents not only a quantum leap for Cadigan as a writer, but in at least two senses, the cumulative capstone of the whole literary movement.

Synners is set in a twenty-first century Los Angeles replete with a profusion of subcultures based in one way or another on virtual realities—the multiplex mediasphere, direct human-computer interface technologies, Artificial Intelligences, artforms based on full-sensory video, interactive full-sensory game realities, and much, much more.

Told through the third-person viewpoints of several characters, all of whom are in one way or another interfaced with this multiplexity of virtual realities, immersed in it, in some cases ultimately subsumed by the virtual entities therein, the plot is far too complex and intricate to summarize here.

But the thematic core of the

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novel is contained within its title, for all of the characters are "Synners" in the multiplex meanings with which Cadigan glosses her coined word.

"Synners" in the sense of "synthesists," for all of them are involved in one way or another with the synthesis of virtual realities—full-sensory MTV-style rock videos, full-sensory interactive game realities, psychedelic states produced by combinations of electronic devices and drugs, a kind of cyberspace ultimately made manifest in the "real" world.

"Synners" in the sense of "synthetic," for more of Cadigan's story than not takes place in the synthetic media and cyber spheres of her future Los Angeles, where the virtual synthetic realities are somehow more pervasive than the "naturally evolved" base level, where people interact with entirely synthetic personalities called up by the electronic machineries from their own subconscious and with artificial intelligences synthesized from the bits and bytes themselves.

"Synners" in the sense of "synergetic," for both the various forms of virtual reality and the people and entities, virtual, synthetic, and otherwise, interfaced with, absorbed by, or entirely creatures thereof, interact, transform into each other, meld synergetically, for good and for evil, so that in the end this ultimately multiplexed and bewilderingly interactive cyberspace becomes the matrix of total reality itself, with what we presently regard as base reality only a relatively minor aspect.

Inside this electronic uber-reality, electronic evolution proceeds apace, as characters merge and interpenetrate, as artificial intelligences arise, grow, develop real personalities, mutate into computer viruses, conflict with each other, until quotidian external reality is quite overwhelmed.

One thing that marks *Synners* as the ultimate cyberpunk novel is that Pat Cadigan takes the science and technology of all this much more seriously than anyone else has before.

Obviously, one cannot speak of accuracy when it comes to material such as this. But I doubt that any hacker, A.I. theorist, video-freak, music producer, or electronic hardware designer will find their intelligence insulted by Cadigan's extrapolations here.

To a certain extent, it is literary smoke and mirrors. She walks the walk, and she talks the talk, and verisimilitude is established by sheer writing skill. But while I am hardly an expert in any of these areas, I don't think I'm a complete ignoramus either, and even I believe that I am able to detect that Pat Cadigan has done much more homework for *Synners* than anyone working this vein has done before.

Of course I *could* be wrong, and it all *could* be skillful bullshit, but if so, what a high order of bullshit it is!

The other thing that makes this novel the cumulative capstone of cyberpunk is exemplified by the final reading of the title—*Synners* as in "sinners."

For, unlike most of such fiction that has gone before, Cadigan's novel proceeds along a kind of spir-

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itual core rather than along the phenomenological surface, applies a complex and balanced moral calculus to explore the implications of all these virtual realities, virtual entities, and their hybrids upon the body politic in the deepest sense, upon the human heart, upon human love.

Synners, in a social sense, is neither a utopia, a dystopia, nor an exercise in neo-Campbellian neutral reportage on the transformations wrought by the exfoliation of the multiplex realities of the cybersphere. Cadigan portrays some of it as positive and powerful artistic tool, some of it as instrument of personal freedom or transcendence, some of it as neurotic or psychotic cafard, and in the end, she seems to be saying that there is a point beyond which it all does go too far, the point at which the multiplexed cybersphere mutates beyond all conscious control, releasing phenomenological chaos upon complex technological civilization, dissolving its center into a fractal explosion of anarchy that brings social and economic cohesion crashing down.

That is the social sin implicit in allowing virtual reality to mutate and exfoliate out of control with nothing but the electronic whirlwind at its heart.

The *personal* sin is the abandonment of human love in favor of the ultimate solipsistic seduction of total immersion in a virtual reality of which the electronic machineries make you the god. Or, as someone once ironically observed: "I prefer masturbation. You meet a better class of people."

Not that Cadigan takes a simplistic and scornful negative viewpoint on the dialectic between virtual realities and human love. There are several intertwining love stories in *Synners*. Sometimes the machineries bring lovers together, sometimes they break them apart, sometimes they are the instruments that destroy relationships, sometimes their salvation.

In the end, the sin is not that of forbidden electronic transcendence but of abandoning human empathy and feeling in the obsessive pursuit of same.

And that is why *Synners* is the cyberpunk capstone. Pat Cadigan has absorbed the whole apparatus, given it a technological credibility it never quite had before, and then taken the whole thing inward and onward past the point beyond which such classifications as "cyberpunk" and "humanist" have any useful meaning. One senses that this is the endpoint of the vector charted by Gibson and Sterling, or rather, perhaps, the point along it beyond which further literary explorations become quite something else.

A something else that Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* approaches along quite a different vector stylistically, and in terms of the technological extrapolation that gets him there.

Here, while electronic instrumentalities do play a subsidiary part in the evolution of virtual realities, and of virtual personalities of certain strange non-cyber sorts, the base technology of reality exfoliation and human transformation is biological, not electronic.

In Ryman's energy- and metal-

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poor successor civilization, biology is the technological cutting edge. Artificial coral reefs hold back the rising seas, more goods are grown and cultured than manufactured, and humans are purple because they have rhodopsin in their skins to allow them to draw nourishment directly from the sun via a form of photosynthesis.

It is also, as Ryman calls it in his introductory chapter, "A Culture of Viruses." Viruses have been developed that impart not only information and skills but social, psychological, and political conditioning, as prescribed by the Party. The Communist Party, that is, for after the collapse, a strange form of Marxism took world power, and now the planet is ruled by a kind of communal living god, the Consensus. The Consensus (actually the world is ruled by a hierarchy of area Consensuses linked together on their ultimate level into a single uber-consciousness) is a kind of communal consciousness resident in huge forests of flesh, with all sorts of powers, including the ability to store copies of human personalities in the meatware nodules of its root systems, or to use them as templates to create "Angels," artificial personalities existing as pure patterns in the space-time geodesics, capable, therefore, of a kind of light-speed space travel, and even time travel of a certain arcane sort.

Cancer has been cured by coating human oncogenes with impermeable sugars called Candy which prevent their expression. But, as it turns out, the myriad mini-cancers that used to form and be eliminated by the human immune system normally were responsible for the production of certain essential proteins that allowed humans to reach their Biblical three score and ten. Now, with cancer "cured," the human lifespan has been halved. Via the viruses, babies learn to speak almost immediately, and "Tykes" perform meaningful labor before they are five.

Thus one aspect of Ryman's title. In one way, childhood as we know it has been completely abolished, but in another way, the whole world has become a "Child Garden" with the Consensus serving in loco parentis, since no one comes into what we would consider full maturity.

Another meaning of "Child Garden" involves the Consensus's peculiar notion of "Democracy." At the age of ten, everyone is "Read." Via a wave of space-time flux, their memories and personalities are copied into the Consensus itself, stored in the meatware, where they become both a means of modeling democratic decision-making processes, and the base-units of the collective consciousness. When not being utilized for these purposes, these virtual children exist in a horrid sort of sensory limbo in the nodules of the Consensus' root system.

Milena, Ryman's third-person viewpoint protagonist, is, for reasons we learn slowly, immune to the viruses, and has not been Read. Thus, her "Bad Grammar," her lesbian tendencies, is a secret, and has not been cured by the appropriate virus.

Milena is a theatrical actress, later a director. She falls in love with Rolfa, a "Polar Woman," who

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is a member of a genetically altered subspecies of human adapted to Antarctica and allowed to function outside the Consensus. Rolfa is a musical genius who has set Dante's entire *Divine Comedy* to music. When she is cured of *her* Bad Grammar (and her creativity) by the viruses of the Consensus, Milena begins the quest to produce the opera as a kind of giant orbital media event visible to the whole planet, and this becomes the core of the book.

The Child Garden is an exceedingly complex story, and there is much, much more, involving the ultimate transcendental end to which the Consensus is manipulating the events and characters, the uncontrolled mutations of the viruses which cause human consciousness itself to mutate bizarrely, the re-introduction of cancer via Milena's apotheosis, and a rather mystical conclusion in which the Consensus achieves a transcendence other than that which it has consciously sought.

The novel is formally and stylistically complex too. For one thing, Ryman has a background in the theater, and there is much theatrical allusion, plays within the novel, and perhaps a shade too much of the limelight and sawdust romance of it all. For another, Ryman's medium has been chosen to suit his message, or rather, perhaps, the milieu; an organic, sometimes poetic, impressionistically descriptive, somehow operatic prose line admirably suited to rendering a world in which it is the meatware, not the hardware, that has so organically and complexly mutated.

More significantly for present purposes, much of the novel takes place during the eventual "Reading" of Milena, a device which Ryman employs to narrate much of the story non-sequentially, as scenes and sequences emerge from her memory non-linearly, organized to suit the writer's formal and narrative purposes rather than following the straightforward vector of her timebound lifeline.

In a certain sense, this is just a highfalutin' way of saying that Ryman uses an extrapolative device inherent in his set-up to justify extensive use of flashback technique. But not quite.

For while Milena is being Read, there are two Milenas: the timebound Milena of the flashback sequences, and what Ryman calls the "Milena who remembers," the Milena observing and participating in the living memory with the maturity and perspective of her whole lifetime. Beyond which is Ryman himself, narrating this dual viewpoint in third person.

Further still, many of Milena's memories involve interactions with various species of mutated personalities—the Bees (humans with group consciousness), the Consensus, Singers (humans who can speak only in song), humans infected with animal personalities, and Rolfa before and after her viral "cure."

Finally, Milena's memories of her childhood in Czechoslovakia have been blocked, her childhood has been lost to her, and when she regains them during the Reading process, re-entering her own personal "Child Garden" in a final and

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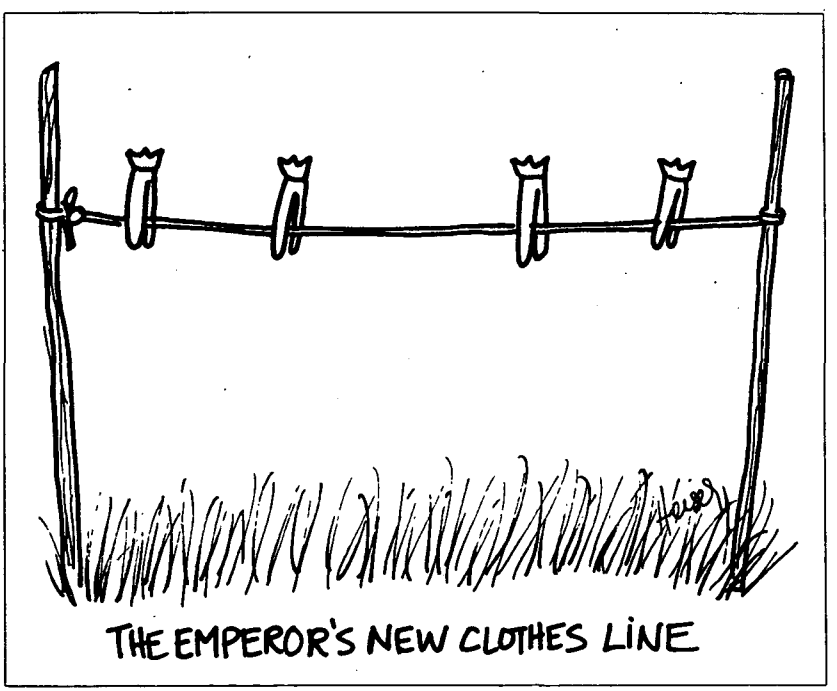
more positive sense, Ryman shows us that language itself creates its own virtual realities, that the world experienced in a linguistic framework of Czech is not quite the world of Anglophone reality, that while one may translate the word for "train," for example, into its dictionary Czech equivalent, the tone of it, the music of it, the cultural and psychic echoes as it chugs through the mind, will be subtly different.

Before the mediasphere or the cybersphere there was the linguistic sphere, and in the absence of same, human consciousness does not develop, as witness feral children raised by wolves, who may be homo sapiens by biological phenotype, but have the consciousness of wolves, not people.

Nor, as Geoff Ryman demonstrates, can any linguistic matrix be a totally transparent window on so-called "objective reality." Our perception of the world is not merely altered but in a real sense created by the linguistic matrix from which our consciousness perceives it, questions of technological alteration of the physical matrix thereof and the sensory apparatus aside.

In this sense, at least, we are all virtual people, for to this extent, *all* reality is virtual, and we are all in it. ●



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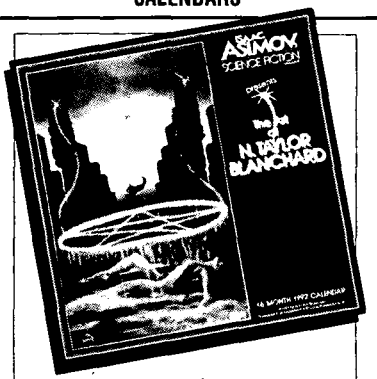

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

w Year's weekend is getting to be a popular time for con(vention)s. the new year at a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, editors, s, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and mple of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 ness] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave ssage and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an E. When calling (early evening's good), say why you're calling right off. for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge and musical keyboard.

NOVEMBER 1991

—**PhilCon.** For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Or phone: **(215) 342-1672 or 563-r 739-9045** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same ddress) at the Adam's Mark. Guests will include: David Brin, artist Moebius.

'—**British Fantasy Con. (081) 540-9443.** London UK. Dan Simmons, Jonathan Carroll, B. Lumley.

—**BeNeLuxCon.** Atlanta Hotel, Rotterdam Netherlands. Kees van Toorn. They survived WorldCon.

—**SoonerCon. (405) 769-4417.** Central Plaza, Oklahoma City OK. Powers, P. Davis, M. Burke.

3C. 1—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 760-9234.** Long Beach CA.

3C. 1—**Darkover Con, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609.** Bradley, K. Kurtz.

3C. 1—**SiliCon, Box 8029, San Jose CA 95155. (408) 977-0562.** S. Brust, Sweet, Shetterley.

3C. 1—**Fantasy Fair, Box 820488, Dallas TX 75382. (214) 350-4305.** Doubletree Hotel.

3C. 1—**Creation, 145 Jericho Tpk., Mineola NY 11501. (516) 746-9626.** Penta Hotel, New York. id the con above are the big annual blowouts for their respective commercial companies. Each runs :ons each year. I only list these, because all are mainly media/comics/animation-oriented.

DECEMBER 1991

-**NordCon, % GKF, Box 76, Gdansk, Poland 80-325. (011-48-58) 531-073.** Polish SF clubs' con.

-**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Andre Norton. A good excuse to go to Florida.

-**DraCon, AF 167, Box 36, Brno 612 00, Czechoslovakia. (05) 337-211.** No more info on this yet.

5—**SOMFCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 774-7592 or 283-0802.** Con for con organizers.

JANUARY 1992

-**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq., #322, Cambridge MA 02139.** Park Plaza Hotel, Boston MA. C. S. Gardner.

-**EveCon, 1607 Thomas Rd., Ft. Washington MD 20744. (301) 292-5231.** A younger crowd.

-**MusiCon, Box 198121, Nashville TN 37219.** A newcomer to New Year's scene, for SF folksinging.

SEPTEMBER 1992

-**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $85 to 12/31/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

-**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598.** WorldCon. $70 in 1991.

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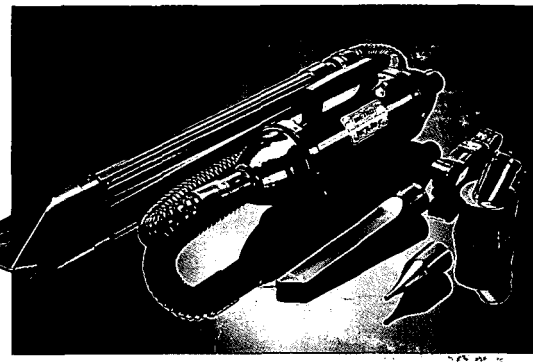

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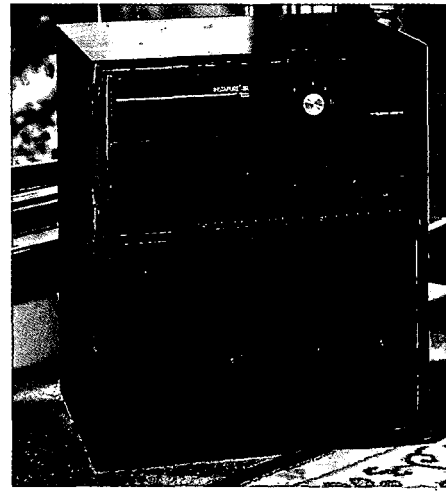

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